AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

Nathan Smith

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According to contemporary sources, Leighton drew part of his inspiration from the following lines from Milton's *Comus*:

"There I suck the liquid ayr
All amid the Gardens fair
Of Hesperus and his daughters three
That sing about the golden tree."

ur-seluen obs. f. OURSELVES

Ursuline f. nn. SMALL LADDER LEADING TO A NARROW PLATFORM ONTO WHICH GYPSIES HAD THEIR TRAINED GOATS CLIMB

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Quarries surround the village on three sides. A plateau, composed and isolated. The sea out beyond the cliffs west and south and east, the waters that brought adventurers and their old world to swallow the peninsula sheet by sheet, rift by run—green-blue. Transformed into cellars and courthouse and church, the harvested stone of the quarries was laid as groundwork to steady the village's establishment. Stone the body of the settlement, the outlying boundaries and base, but it was not for these foundations to give a name—it was from the emptiness, from the hollows left behind that the village's title would arise. In the most westerly outcrop of the land, the store of solid inland rock came to an end halfway down to the sea. In the stone's absence, a vein of exceedingly fertile soil was exposed, soil that the claimant owners, the family Miner, seeded, planting various shrubs and luxuriant fruit-bearing trees: the A'rbutus, Mrytle, Ivy and Bay, the Wild-Olive and Pomegranate, the Lotus, the Pear, the Mulberry and Vine, the Almond and Black Walnut, and most voluminously, the Golden Apple—trees whose success bared within their branches the place's emphatic designation: Bloomville, a village where there are now one-hundred-and-ten hundred lives. Ursula Miner was to be one of them.

SATURDAY

OCTOBER 21

BATTAWA, LA

URSULA FRANCES

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

Sitting idle for six months in the post office, a note that keeps repeating itself, familiar handwriting scrawled on a blue envelope. Sent care of the postmaster, a letter addressed to her, specific address unknown.

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The day began with a threat in the southeast. First illumination broke only just as the sun neared its apex, cloudheads dispelling and parting from the light. The environment had altered with the anticipation of rain: winds rose and twisted about, leaves flipped sides, the grasses waved in trails and laid down. Greens thickened. Birdsong fell short, and all stilled. The upper reaches retained their waters, the setting broke from its expectant impasse, and any signs that this may have occurred were negated by the time she woke up.

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In the player in the bedroom Ursula found a video of the Robins together, shot from afar, seemingly before they had children. He still had all of his hair and most of his muscle, and she was just plain . . . her face stronger, her physique slight. Bodies possessed with motion. Ursula looked down at the mattress she sat on and back to its phantom image on the screen. She ran her hand across the bed. The pulsing images moved. Mrs. Robin had a clover hair-tie on that was coming undone, limbs met and coursed over one another, and they'd had a different bedspread then. They were natural together, as if unaware that the artificial eye was there, mechanical and reproducing, freezing them into recorded images. Their blanket was printed with green ovate leaves.

After she was through with this, which was long before the Robins were, Ursula went out and laid on the roof over the front porch, her arm crooked over the bridge of her nose. The floor-to-ceiling windows behind her reflected skewed variations of the sunshine. The left one slowly slid, inching downward against the counterweights that were sunk into the recessed window frame. A far off rooster bawled, there was a crash in the distance, hornets in the eaves. All went unnoticed. Forearm veiling her face, Ursula prodded at her lower teeth with her fingers.

The aggregate-crowned shingles of the rooftop trapped sunlight and channeled the warmth up through the fabric of her dress. Shifting slightly to the southwest, the metal weather vane moaned. She went on poking at her teeth. Compressed together, they had never aligned as they should have. She ran a fingernail along her gums and breathed through her mouth onto her hand. The breath ran down her arm. Still draped over her eyes, her other arm was going numb.

Laying there in the direct light she tensed the pin-pricks in her arm and held her position until the sunrays were eclipsed away by the overhanging peak of the house. When she made Jay look at her jagged lower teeth he had said he liked them as they were, that they gave her character. Jumble-jawed was not a characteristic she fancied though. As the shadow of the building inched over her, she took her fingers away from her mouth.

The façade of the house above her possessed a mashed-up architectural design—a single columned tower fused into a modern two-level American home—and characteristics aren't

character, Jay had said. On to her skin: curving up from jawline to earlobe, a dark crescent there, following the bone. Just an appearance, what appears. She rather liked the tower she had told the Robins, it could have been real church-like, a proper steeple, had it only been more symmetrical with the body of the house and not pushed over to one side as it was. Jay had said he liked her birthmark just as it was. It could not have been anything else.

She moved her arm away from her face to stare up at the brightness flaring out around the edges of the steeple, eyes and arm reacclimatizing, the tower rising as it did into the path of the sunshine. Concentric, dross-colored stone ornamentation pierced the center of the sky. Her hair ground against the coarse grain of the shingles and the outline of the tower swallowed the roof and her in a spear of shade, her teeth all the deadened off-white of seashells. Her arm upheld in the light.

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The house telephone echoed through the high-ceiled vaults of the dayroom and the staircase beyond as she returned inside and ignored it. She paced through the Robins' bedroom, turned off the television, and went on into the dressing room. A paper wasp was perched on the wardrobe mirror and the distant vibrations of her step stirred it and sent it off into the greater day. A sweep around the room, and she settled down to the vanity.

Perfume bottles were laid out in divisions of notes and sources, region of origin and given when and by whom and for what—there were dozens. Idly she selected a fluted viridian bottle. Surrounded by prized items from overseas, that particular eau de Cologne had come from a Walgreens in Carter, Alabama. She lightly spritzed a tissue and sniffed it. And on to other varieties, her selections based on container colors. Lots of green.

The phone continued to ring out between brief periods of silence and Ursula went on sampling the array of bottles and the mists they produced, making comical faces in the mirror as she passed from one to the next. Most of the perfumes had italicized foreign words printed on their ornate labels, and one empty flask dated back more than a century. She held a bottle up toward the light streaming in through the drawn cloth curtains. Murky, visibly separated, an enlivened liquid dust. She placed the bottle back untested.

In short order the collective fragrance in the room grew thick, her face infused with a bucolic ruddiness that was some form of handsome (the hue of her complementing the coloration of the faux-rustic wallpaper that adorned the room), and she sneezed, violently scattering scents onto the mirror. Composed again, she mopped at the mirror with the frayed sleeve of her dress. She put her breath onto the mirror and mussed about some more—slightly better. The phone rang long and shrilly, the automatic message only answering after half a dozen clacks. A pause of a few moments and the sound would return, and be answered in turn.

A hunt through the vanity, typical beauty fare: creams, brushes, ointments, hairpins, odds and ends. Before she was through though, here was a little something—inside a jewelry box, a black and white photo of an international personality. It was a nude. The print acted as a liner for the box's secret lift-away compartment and it was smashed in there to fit. Gaze offset, hair gray-flecked and playfully ruffled, his shoulders broad, relaxed and lulling, stomach all loose, his gender half attentive—seemingly unposed. On the right hand side of the shot there was someone's bare leg resting across his left thigh. She traced an edge of the photo and then tucked

it into the rosewood framing of the mirror. Blocking out a little reflection, the picture hovered there, afloat in the ectypal dressing room scene.

From the photograph to the mirror and back, slowly: looking at herself again, childish—shy of herself and a gray shade-printed ghost. She shook her head side to side and tried to be serious, to not smile at herself in the mirror for a full minute or so. A smirk stole upon her. It happened several times over before she was able to hold it together even half a minute. Counting aloud didn't help. Reciting a scripture passage didn't, nor did a song lyric. Her lower teeth, flawed as they were, underscored her slow smile. . . . She looked away. The ceiling fan circulated the excess perfume around the room in disorienting currents. The unfastened edges of the photograph arched away from the mirror.

Some of the jewelry she had piled up on the vanity appeared to be real, and some was very much counterfeit. Ruby, amber and opal. Garnet, colored plastic and white-dyed-blue. Ursula put all back in its place, pouring the tangle of necklaces, looped-together earrings, bracelets and loose stones back into the jewelry box. She reassembled the vanity to its initial order, plucked the photograph from the mirror and slid it into the pocket on the left side of her dress.

She had sewn that pocket on the dress herself. With its button and safety pin arrangements and some big black stitches, it was really more of a pouch than a pocket. Her friend Darcy, the owner of the dress at the time of its refashioning, she hadn't been terribly fond of this new improvement. A menagerie of tan and ginger and russet bird-shaped cloth patches, this dress was one of the few items Ursula wouldn't part with. It was worn for days and even weeks-on-end, especially in the low times of falling autumn when everything would humect: her skin, lineaments of oil and salt beneath the blades of a fan, unwashed hair. Pollen and granules adrift through the dressing room. The decade traces of a cooking kitchen borne out to the rest of the house. The ashen stir of the countryside firepit through the backyard.

She played with the buttons and fixes for a bit, rearranged some of the pins to get a secure close and headed to the hall. As she took her first descending step on the steep gray-primed stairs, something in the bedroom adjacent sparked in her eye. A quick detour back up.

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The room was Lydia Robin's and Ursula had been in it many times before, but never alone. She stood at the corner of the canopy bed, looking up at the recessed shapes carved into the bedpost. The flourishes and lack of joinery in the work were something to be admired. Pulling a low-slung chair over to one of the pillars, she hopped up and traced the course of the sculpted wood grain with her fingertips.

The decoration of the walls surrounding her alternated from a simmering silver and gray papering on one wall to a tranquilized light emerald textured paint on the next, and being the base of the tower that rose from the southeast corner of the house, the bedroom was staged with six walls, and so back and forth, shade and green—a wall covered with wallpaper and a wall covered with paint always facing one another in opposition. When the cirrus-like overlays of silverleaf paper on gray captured the radiance of the rising morning sun, the illumination of the room became a confusing and dazzling sight. The effect was dimmed somewhat in the early afternoon, the light dulled, oblique. Still, at certain angles the collage-style wallpaper—a unique

print and without repeating pattern—it looked as if it might have been laced through with holograms.

There were dryads worked into the form of the wood and fauns, oceanids and other things too that were small and less noticeable. Ursula followed these inventions around the bedposts, only giving way when her arms started sagging down of their own accord. She pulled the veil of mosquito netting clear and flopped onto the mattress, the net falling into position behind her, waves of fabric, mounds of comforters and bright white sheeting the landscape.

The bed was so large that it was almost a square, and Ursula rolled around a moment in its middle. One of her legs was left tangled in the netting off the side of the bed, a knot of ghost slipping up over her calf. She lay there, taking in the smell of Lydia and bedclothes. Runs in the mesh veil seemed to pull out patterns and defined forms from the expanse of air separating the domed ceiling and the mattress, the lines ebbing with the scant breeze that made through the room. With a shift of her leg these slight apparitions altered, fled, realigned. She began to hum, to lie still a bit. To undo the sheets and fuss underneath the bedding. And on to under the bed itself.

A fine film of moted debris lay evenly on the bright-hued floorboards beneath the boxspring, a few light fingerprints intruding upon its blanketed expanse. She could see stuffed animals in clear vacuum-sealed cellophane traveling bags beneath the bed fringe, dresses and socks, a cloth suitcase, loose-leaf music sheets, an avalanching stack of vinyl records and some notebooks. She made her selection quickly, leaving most of the dust undisturbed.

When she got over to the other side of the room to put the record on, she ended up simply restarting the LP that was already on the turntable. She just flipped it over. Beside the record player were rows of nail polish bottles, and as the needle dropped onto the music with a *ffff-ff*, Ursula grabbed one. She turned back, sidling in through the mosquito net as she slid the unused record beneath the bed skirt. Crouched forward with her foot propped on the headboard, she set to work applying lacquer to her toes.

When she was halfway through her left foot, a dot-sized spider swayed into view before her. Suspended from an invisible thread, it was just beginning its task, dangling, and climbing back the way it had come. Applicator brush still poised in her hand, Ursula watched as the early stages of the web formed. The nail polish capped, she passed the bottle through the web, snagging the creature mid-labor.

On their way down the stairs the phone rang. The answering machine came on and made its chirping sounds and played a frozen receptive voice through its little speaker. As she was walking toward the veranda Ursula recognized the party speaking through the hissing filters of the machine. She changed course and slowly walked over to the phone and picked it up. She held the toenail polish out away from her body as the spider went on circling the contours of the bottle. There was feedback from the machine and then silence. She couldn't figure out how to turn the answering machine off (and didn't have any free hands to do so with—trying to clamp the phone between shoulder and ear, she nearly lost it to the floor), so she gave up and was recorded.

You calling for me?

Course I am Frances, why else would I be calling over there all day long do you think? Why didn't you pick up before?

Why're you calling me here?

That's where you are, isn't it?

Yeah, but how is it that you know that?

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Ah darling, you know I've my ways. Know you can't just up and disappear like you'd like, like you're always trying. Like you escaping or something. What for, anyway? But now come on, you know you can't get out of my sight for long. I was just talking to—

Just, look. Sorry to be cutting you short and all, but I kind of got a situation going on here, Ursula said, the spider making inroads for her arm. What's it you want? Quick.

Jeez Frances, little snappy today aren't we? If you would of just listened to one of the many many messages I left for you on the machine anytime today, then you—

Fine, okay, she said. With that she hung up the phone and hastened outside, spider on her wrist.

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A jet-black insect carved out an arc of flight, leaving her—a bow, cresting away in the shape of a wing—out of sight before she could think of its name. Stilled in the air, simply hovering, orange and slight patterns of black crossed its body in stripes. In motion the waved markings congealed into dark uniform. *Dragonfly*. The name made her beam when she finally brought it around. She turned, but it was gone.

Ursula's bare feet stirred up a cloud of dirt, her newly greened toenails shone . . . she kicked, green whips and then stones skipping away and more dust. Shuffling this way down the ditch with a pair of tangerine heels slung over her shoulder, she headed for the Battawa common store. Not in the habit of keeping anything on her feet, she hadn't had any shoes on at the house. She'd tried on a few of Lydia's wrinkled ballet slippers, but they'd been far too small, so she settled for a pair of Mrs. Robin's Sunday shoes.

The stems of the heels knocked together lightly as she walked, bare feet padding down on the ground. A ring-necked pheasant leapt up out of the grass depths to her side, wings beating a short rapid hush, gliding down. Settled again, the bird cried out its baleful call toward the groundcover to the south. Glancing after it, her gaze was set at just such an angle where the spectral colors of the sunlight materialized in the hair that was hanging down in her face, prismatic through her dirty locks. She paused over the light a moment, then broke it apart, tossing her head.

She didn't used to wear shoes when going to the store. A woman there named Teresa had liked her and had looked the other way, away from Ursula's bare feet and away from the sign on the door prescribing the dress code. The last time that she had arrived barefoot though, they told her that Teresa had left. Then Ursula had walked all the way back to Telly's to hunt up some shoes so that she could turn around again, go to the store, and shop for Telly's foodstuffs.

Ursula's friend Telly had not left the house in four years. *Je ne peux pas sortir ressemblant à ceci!* She sat around all day watching French movies, speaking along with the dialogue while reading the subtitles. At least eight hours of viewing a day, the same tapes over and over again. A year ago she had re-titled herself, wanted to be called Zoé, a more appropriate name for her she felt. To Ursula she would always be her old friend, Telly. Fortunately, Ursula was not in the habit of using proper names when addressing most folks, so any differences in labeling never really became much of a problem. Ursula talked to Telly and Zoé responded.

Ursula would stay with Telly sometimes when she had nothing else going on or nowhere else to sleep. But she'd only stay over if Telly's sister's kids weren't over. Even if there were nowhere else she could be sure of crashing for the night, if those kids were around, Ursula

wasn't. If she came wandering up to the house and overheard them from afar, she'd just turn and wander herself back out into the evening. Nearly teenagers, they would rampage full over the place, putting hearth, home and Telly all underfoot.

While their visits were infrequent enough, these young relations were the only real person-to-person, face-to-face contact Telly had with the outer world. Them and Ursula. She did have her telephone network too, and Ursula always at the center of it, but that wasn't the same. Ursula, for one, she wasn't much for phoning. Besides foreign phrases copped from films, much of Telly's recent memory was devoted to local numbers—she was a self-contained phone directory. Anyone who was anyone in town, or even just lived there for a time, she knew their number. So she had her ways, shut-in that she was. The electric projected pulse of her voice, a woman of the world, *ouais*.

She had known the Robins' number since before she stopped leaving the house, and all but one of the messages that had been left on their answering machine throughout the day were from her. The other message, an automated voice, offered vinyl siding, payable in installments. Telly's were mostly concerned with Ursula running to the store to shop for her, the few exceptions being the last transmissions, the majority of which Telly had used to declaim how rude Ursula had been in hanging up on her. Spiteful, exaggeratedly venomous attacks with little focus or coherence, these last messages ran to near breathlessness before the taped voice would retreat and again request that Ursula perform this ritual errand. One message was the continuation of the last, and for several Telly had simply called back immediately because she'd been cut off by the machine.

Grocery runs usually occurred (or were at least requested) every two or three days. It normally took her a while to get around to it, but Ursula always shopped for Telly when asked, and Telly would always manage to find out where Ursula was so that she could ask—even when Ursula went invisible to everyone else (a special skill of hers). And Telly did so without ever leaving the house or seeing other people.

Ursula sometimes claimed that Telly was a witch. Claimed that while you slept, when you slept over, Telly was always flinching bits of your hair to use in her dark craft—hair, fingernails, the spit on your spoon, eyelashes, used tissues and band-aids, that kind of thing. She'd do this to *always know your location*, for example. Telly was working on a cackle to answer these regular accusations. This track-down though, the uncanny finding of Ursula (hair spells or no hair spells), it was often so elaborate that it involved upwards of a half dozen people on the telephone, any of whom could have been asked to do the simple errand that was desired. But Telly, as her housebound state attested, she was very set in her ways, and in her ways she was very set on Ursula.

They had a system: thirty-seven separate lists were kept on hand by the proprietors of the common store, all just for Telly. All the items on the lists had been prefigured by Telly herself, each separate list would fill one grocery bag, and Ursula could carry two grocery bags back with her to Telly's house. Telly would talk to Ursula and give her two numbers, each number an order for a specific bag filled with specific ingredients and supplies that would (or should) last through the next few days. And then she would hunt Ursula out again. She operated an account at the store like back in the old days of general stores and neighborly credit, only now it was that the tab was always immediately resolved; the store kept one of Telly's charge cards on hand that she had given them, along with the permission to let Ursula sign for it all. The cashiers didn't even have to ring up the individual items anymore, they knew the price of each numbered list and they would just add the two lists together—two numbers added together for forty-seven items. Or

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sixteen items. Or thirty-two, or eleven—whatever the two variable grocery bags held. Even when the price of sliced bologna rose or shallots dipped, Telly's cost remained static, a bonus for the store's best customer and the lazy cashiers.

This setup emerged as Ursula quickly grew tired of the initial demands of the errand, which involved making lists, acquiring cash, and trying to carry way too much at once in flimsy brown paper grocery bags. Telly could have made it even simpler on her friend, but for whatever reason the woman couldn't be persuaded to just take delivery from the store, or to at least call her orders in before dispatching Ursula to gather the load. Realizing the situation wasn't going to get better on its own (and noting Telly's increasing dependence on her), Ursula organized the current arrangement. System in place, she now did nothing but go to the store, relay two numbers, scrawl out a name on the charge, and then drop the stuff off. Every time she went to the store Telly gave her a five dollar allowance on the balance. The card had never been used anywhere else.

And so to the store Ursula walked, on her way keeping a lookout for the return of the dragonfly. Intemperable, gone away, vanished. The cheap fabric of her dress clung to many of the critical parts of her body and she fluffed the whole thing out with regularity. The hum of the countryside filled her senses, and slowly, along with its murmur rhythm, she went on in a careless stroll down the dust-shaded lane, her eyes all about, either side of the road flanked with rushes, tiny-headed wildflowers, coral honeysuckle and wisteria mashes, plane trees, christmas and cinnamon ferns and other creepers and cypress, flowered dogwood and few scattered white and green ashes, leaves twitching in the miniature crosswinds while everything else felt stilled. The air hung thick, rending faraway appearances over the asphalt wavy and fantastical.

Off in one of the open fields Ursula saw a man burning brushwaste, he standing there watching into its leaps while she stared after him, and then he looking up at her. Gray-old and short and without a shirt. He was vaguely familiar and so, being too far off to say anything by way of greeting to him, she waved. He strained his eyes to place her and timidly looked back down at the fire, a second later raising his hand in a gesture of blind reciprocation, his sight once again trained on the flames. The burning branches and underbrush altered the cloud-backed skyline behind them much as the tarmacked roadway distorted visibility in front of her. Mirages led into town.

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The road was in a state of decomposition, creases in its pavement running out into the sun-baked mud fundament of the surrounding fields where plantlife stole in, bursting shoots and blossoms spreading through the tar's expanding slits, further negating any distinctions between the two surfaces—macadam and earth, both blanched, blanketed by the sun and vegetation through all, scorched. An abandoned hubcap shot off pinwheels of light as thin strips of cloud shuttled across the sky, their movements visible. Dark impressions traced over the prehistoric spikelets and thistles that lined the roadside, draping the plants in a momentary respite from the sun. The } of a bird pulled into wider and wider rounds overhead and Ursula had to shield her eyes to watch it progress outward. To look up this way she also had to stop, and with the sun hanging still in its afternoon brilliance she was soon to move on. Walking slow and deliberately in the ashen gravel between the overheated roadway and the field, she sidestepped broken glass and other detritus and refuse.

Something shuffled its weight in the opposite ditch and when she moved her head toward the sound she could hear the tires coming on from behind her. She turned, looking back just as the bikes passed. Two young boys skidded to a stop in front of her. They gathered themselves, and yelled: *Frances Cuntus!* Frances *Cuntus!* sticking their tongues out to accentuate their contempt, sullying already rough adolescent visages down to the very crooks of their mouths. From out of the thick sedge and scrub the bark of an unseen fox carried across the fields. The younger boy cleared his throat. His voice had failed him and broke on the last syllable of the chanted slur. u*HH*-s was how it went.

They were bare-chested and clad only in cutoff jean shorts, heavily worn black. The older boy, Larry, had a bow slung over his chest. The smaller one had a sash diagonally across his dirty torso, a nearly emptied quill to his back, the few arrows there rattling around against his movement. The small boy puffed his chest out bellicosely and continued to make guttural adjustments in his throat, turning redder in the cheeks all the while. They straddled their bikes, each with a foot on the pavement and the other still on a pedal, as if they might need to speed off in a moment. With them posturing there like that Ursula could see up past their tan lines to the white of their thighs. The smaller kid had hair like dirty straw and Larry's was the color of manure, with less parts straw in it than the other elements of that particular compound. Both had severe sunburns and they looked like red onions one could peel all the way down to their green hearts.

Ursula was easily a head taller than either of the boys. She shifted her weight back onto one leg and said: Hey Montgomery, why're you always hanging around with this dick?

Why ain't you? Larry said, gesturing and then cupping himself about the zippered area of his shorts with his left hand. The little kid scoffed and then tried to pretend it was a cough and then didn't know what to do.

Ugh. Well, for one, I don't really go in for prepubescents, Ursula said, looking at them evenly, from one to the next, neither of them meeting her eyes. Though you Monty, you used to be so sweet when you were littler. When'd you pick up with this punk?

Montgomery began mumbling something about him not being a punk and Larry started in with a rehearsed line concerning the shoes she wasn't wearing, but Ursula cut them both short: You guys are so big and tough, if a body was you the only thing it'd be more scared of than girls would be oneself, cuz you're—Oh! *so* big! Oh! *so* tough! She laughed at them and nodded toward their gear: You been out playing cowboys and injinns?

We ain't playing, Montgomery said. It ain't a game.

No?

No.

Yeah.

There was quiet a moment and Larry spit into the ditch.

Well, all that killing must've been hard work, she said. Do you want to play a game now then, relieve you of all your work stress?

Larry was looking at her legs and had snaked his hand up toward the base of his stomach. Montgomery asked: What game?

Cursing game.

I ain't never heard of that, Montgomery said.

Oh, with foul mouths like yours, you'll like it. Larry spit again and asked what the game was. The rules are easy, she said. There's only two things. You take turns cussing, but it can't be anything sexual. That's it. Want to play then?

Yeah. Sure.

Cool. I'll go first so you see how it works. She grinned: Jesus-goddamn-Christ. See? That's it. Oh, only thing is, is I forgot to tell you—if you break the rules you get done to you whatever it was you said.

Curious looks here from the boys.

Go Montgomery, your turn.

The little boy looked over at his friend as if unsure how to proceed and Larry nodded to him to go on and go. The little boy screwed up his features into a thinking face, held this pose for a few seconds, then smiled: Shit! He seemed very proud of himself.

Ursula smiled too. See? Told you you was sweet. . . . She reached over to him, tousling his short clumpy hair. But, but, but. But I'm sorry sweetie, you broke the rules. Larry? Will you do the honors?

Hey, shits ain't sexual, Montgomery squeaked, pulling his head away from Ursula's hand, his face dropping and concerned, looking over to Larry for confirmation.

Aw, sweetheart, Ursula said, stooping over to look him in the eye. I didn't know the reason you used to be so cute was cuz you were *so* naïve. But I'm afraid it is, sexual that is.

A look of panic spread on the little boy's face and Ursula turned to Larry: Larry, you ready to do this?

Do what?

Well, what he said. Do that to him. Sexually. That's the rules.

Fuck you, Frances.

You boys just aren't any good at this, are you? And you, you're not even waiting your turn Larry. What you just said, that's sexual too, if you didn't know. We'll let Montgomery have the honors on that one, the doing it to you, once you've done what you have to do to him, that is.

Both the boys started yelling at her, Montgomery more near crying really, and she went on: Well, I'd of thought you two would be better at this, and now you're all just going to be little wusses and not follow the rules? Kids—little kids is what you are. I should of known you wouldn't know what to do. What's what, and whatnot. With a girl like me, if you can't say things nice—cunt, for example, being a lesser form of nice—and if you don't want to make nice with me then why don't you just go touch each other like usual. I don't mind, really. Go on! But I for one, I don't particularly care to see you jerking for each other in public. Not like this anyways, saying things like *cunt* and such things, stuff you don't even know the first thing about cuz you could just go do it for real with each other for all I care and it could be so pretty if you weren't all so ugly-minded like you are. . . .

This shut them up and the boys stood there a little off balance, struggling to concoct a proper comeback. What? The little kid itched at his scruff and appeared to be about to reply when Larry spat on the ground between them all and pedaled off, leaving his sidekick there by himself—mouth half open and nothing to say now—Ursula standing there staring him down, a hand on her hip. Montgomery closed his jaw, swallowed, and swiveled his bike around, muttering *Punk*, or something that sounded like it as he left.

A retreat enacted, she set to waving overblown farewells to them. She picked up a paper napkin from the litter of the roadside and flailed it about as if it were a queen's prize linen, adieu-*adieu* in a fake gravelly voice—a rubbing off voice she would say—and even as far down the lane as they were, she could still see the blushing that burst out the back of Larry's head to the tips of his ears. Right at the end of her fare-thee-wells—they some ways away and she just basically hollering after them at that point—the little one, his foot slipped from his bike pedal

and his balance followed, his ride nearly ending in the nettles and viper grass of the v-shaped ditch. When he swung his wobbly bike into the middle of the road away from the falloff, Ursula stifled back a laugh and shouted more mock-attack, ending with something like: Just cuz you wear your sex on the outside don't mean you have to be so coarse about it! You wiener-machines! *You boys are so sweet you make my guts soft!*

As the bikes clipped around the corner of an intersecting lane, a pair of wild hens poked their heads through the sloping weeds of the roadside. Incautiously investigating the commotion, they leapt up onto the eroded asphalt out of the ditch, fluttering and a-squawk. They were brown and dirty white and they looked around in all directions relevant to them before bounding over toward the feral flowering tufts of the opposite side; moving with forward jerks and suspicion, they lurched into the field edge and disappeared amongst the rushes and flushed blooms. Ursula went over to poke around and see if she could sight them out in the man-high tangle of rakish sedge, but the undergrowth there was too dense—to find anything within it one would have to go in. She parted a stand of sicklepod and stepped in through it and stood still and listened. When the dissonant sound of the clucks joined the low constant hum of the field they were always coming from different directions and never where she thought they would be, and so after a while of just standing there, motionless and bent, she gave it up, got out of the jumble, and on her way.

When she reached the three-forked intersection of the road, there lay a treasure—spoils of juvenile verbal warfare. The little boy, Montgomery Vents, had dropped a scratch notebook out of his shorts pocket. It rested there, facedown between the road proper and the dirt shoulder. Already open as it was, she couldn't not look.

The bulk of its scribblings were devoted to a study of what lizards would be like if they were men, or vice versa, and some other things too: a diagram clipped out of a magazine and spit-glued inside the front cover detailed how one could go about building a box kite out of common household materials, or for less than two dollars; columns (two to a page) of potential aliases and code words were listed in alphabetical order and a poor slanting script, all of them very clever in the way of boys his age, laden with much sex-subtext; three purple-penned tableaux: monkeys attacking tennis players—bloody rackets, severed netting, a single sneaker—the monkeys making off with rackets on the page's flip; several sketches of increasing anatomical accuracy depicting a fort composed of muscle tissue, alternately titled *Pond castle* and *Castle blond* with cutout newspaper letters; the word *scatter* covering consecutive pages, written in various sizes and shadings; pictures of certain types of buttons, seeds, tracks, and leaves, all identified underneath in the same hand with their scientific names (even the buttons somehow); stains from a chocolate and red candy piece; a drawing of what M.V.[9/27] thought a whale's skeleton should look like; a list of phrases to be said more often (mixed spellings throughout); a quarter-folded and seemingly unused Kleenex, perhaps marking his place; a map of how to escape from the lending library with stolen tapes; some straight dark hairs pasted onto a page; coal drawings of so-labeled mackleuuolves(?); a page of rather common postage stamps affixed along the outside of and bordering the edges of a small postcard from Indiana (message side down, cornfield on display); outlines for a confidence scam which had probably been seen in a movie; hangmen games; long expired coupons for orange juice, strawberry milk; and, lastly as it would happen (when she had skipped to the end of the book), an encrypted love note written to a mystery individual that was all too easily ciphered out. Working backwards, she stopped halfway through the letter. The small book was an old date and calendar system with a blue

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

cardboard cover adorned by five-pointed white stars, and it went into her dress pocket, adding to the other curiosa stored there.

A little further down the road she saw some birds sitting on an arrow that was stuck into the side of an old and desiccated wooden fencerow. She sat down on a small rise near there beneath a blue beech, and with the stub of pencil that was twined to the book's spine, she began sketching them out in the boy's journal. Perched on high upon the arrows, they were safely above the clutches of the lizardmen that ran amuck all over the page of 11th December, 1976. It was a Saturday and a soft black-lead arrow shaft pierced the loop of the second *a*.

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With the dopplering come-near of automobiles Ursula would slope down amongst the grassweed tides off the berm and wait for the vehicles to pass, the roadway there being only barely the width of a modern car. On came an engine chirr, down off the road with Ursula. Rather than overtaking her position though, this pickup crept up beside her and idled along the lane, matching her pace. The truck would have been an antique in the north where it had been built, but here, where roads were never salted, one still saw them in regular day-to-day use. A burnished tamarind color, the vehicle sputtered as it slowed.

The man inside this particular truck looked out at her with a quizzical expression and greeted her warmly. He was a large broad man, with clean-shaven cheeks and scalp. His eyelashes were unnaturally long, and chalky peeling lips highlighted the arch of his smile as he addressed Ursula, his voice high-pitched and melodious.

She replied on the defensive, her recent run-in with the boys not long past, and this customer, roadside idling and whatnot, this could be a more difficult situation. After his initial salutation, she looked up into his face: You wouldn't be coveting my being, would you?

His laughter was high and shrill and it lasted longer than it seemed it should. He slapped himself bodily and she was moving herself further off from the truck by the time he stopped. The man wore an unbuttoned shirt and whistled through very root-white teeth as he came down from his laughter.

Whew! Only aspects of it darling, he exhaled heavily, catching his breath. Only parts, he said. Nothing about which to worry.

She voiced concern about the balance of his mind and he started laughing again: No, no reason to worry about. And on, he laughed some more.

When he had quieted down again, she asked him: Like what? She blinked at him hard. What aspects then?

Oh mercy, he pushed air out of his mouth as if it were an intrusive thing, an unwanted visitor. Oh, only the innateness. Or naturalness I suppose—the naturalness, yes. Of you out here, strolling, yes, and barefoot. Almost glad to be getting dirty it seems—me, myself, I am far too much of a priss for that type of carrying on. Yes, yes indeed.

He sniffled periodically throughout his speaking, and hissed furiously through his *s*'s too, and though a bit suspect in these ways and others, he smiled in such a way that assuaged her, lessening the distance she kept from the vehicle. As she came closer this smile revealed the slightest of gaps between his front teeth. Ursula stuck a matchstick in her mouth and cocked it, looking a parody of tough.

I do not believe we have had the pleasure to have met before. I am Raymond.

Pleased to meet you, Raymond. She switched the match over to the corner of her mouth and extended her hand into the cab's window: I'm Frances. Or Franny, that's okay too.

He wiped his palm on his shirt and then used only the biggest three digits of his puffy pink hand to shake, like an old man greeting a child who thinks she is a princess, short the bow and the kiss. She brought her hand back slowly, as if it had been kissed and she didn't know what she thought about it.

People call you Ray?

People may call me whatever they are able to. And you too, you may call me Ray or whatever else your heart fancies. I was called Raymond first, but it certainly is not an end-all be-all of what I am addressed as.

She moved off a few feet into the ditch and kept walking. The truck rolled along at her side. Ursula strained her features in the afternoon's glare. You talk kind of different, she said. You're not from here, are you?

That is not the most polite thing to say to a newly met near-stranger.

Near? What?

Near—as in, we have names now, do we not?

No, not that. Why not polite?

Oh, well. . . . Firstly, what if I were to happen to be sensitive about the way my voice sounds? His voice rose and rose as he spoke: Hence, *im*polite.

I didn't mean it that way, Ursula said.

Sure about that? What way did you mean? He looked at her for a moment, his head held strangely, cocked and fleshy, sloping into his chest. Mouth firmly set, his lips were either fascinating or frightening. They twitched oh so slightly, independent of one another. And: I do, you know, sound funny, and I have heard about it all my life from people. And really, the weird thing I think, the thing is—is that it *is* funny. More than they think I think anyway—the fact that I have to hear about it from other people, how I sound I mean. A person cannot, cannot absolutely anyway, cannot hear themselves what they sound like. I just speak as I have to.

A silence between them then, the grass sashaying in the small breeze, the engine coughing the truck down the lane. And the man said: Say, maybe you are a local, Ms. Frances? You sure sound like one. At least what you say.

I didn't say you sounded funny, she said.

No?

Yeah. I said different—like, the way you talk. The words, not your sound.

Ah, but they are close. Maybe the same? And I do sound funny, and have been told so.

I guess, she said, shrugging and turning her head. She stopped and the truck stopped a little ahead of her, its reactions not quite as precise as bare feet. You from Battawa? she asked.

He nodded.

You live here?

Again, he nodded, and she looked away.

How come I never seen you around before? It ain't that big a place.

I would not know why you have not. And—and I think I might ask you the same. I know you are not from here.

Ursula wiped her feet on a small patch of oat grass while the truck idled at her side, the light beating on them in equal measure. Well, guess I'm from a lot of places, she said. Ever heard of Chensaw?

No, he said. No, I have not. And I did not know that one could be from more places than one.

Well, that's my favorite so far. She glanced back over toward him, and off to the horizon. Chensaw. Wasn't there too long, but I been here awhile anyhow. She started walking again, and the truck inched down the road.

But you are kind of new here though, yes? I feel like you must be. Relatively, anyway. And there is probably plenty around here. . . . He stopped off with this, but she didn't respond or interject. He waited, to no avail. Generally I know about all that is going on around here, he said. But you—you are off my radar, kid. Where do you live?

Ursula silent, watching out across the fields. At length he asked again and she said: Around. Where you live?

Why did you not stay in Chensaw if you liked it so?

I liked it, she said. Didn't say it was perfect or I couldn't leave. So I did.

He studied her stride and then looked back up the road. I rent in the Temples' old house, he said. No one but me now since Marcia died. You know the Temples?

No.

They got a boy about your age if I remember correct, their cousin who is also a Temple does.

What's his name? she asked, and wanting to know how old he thought she was, she put that question to him too. He hadn't heard her right though, and when she repeated herself she just asked after the boy.

How is he called? Uh, let me see. . . . Harold. Harry, maybe?

Don't.

Don't know him?

No, like I said.

Hm. There was a knee-deep pothole in the road and he had to pull his truck off into the ditch to bypass it—tire tracks were worn on each side, paths circling around the cavity and cutting bramble patches down to dirt. When he pulled back into the roadway proper he continued: Their house, the Temple family here in town, it is the parish museum. First two floors are converted over for that. It is still called Temple House, though none of them live there anymore, and I am the only one that will ever live in it again, as a renter anyway, as is stipulated in the will. Or by the trust? In paperwork, at any rate. You never been to the museum?

No, haven't.

Raymond wiped his whole naked head with an Easter-colored handkerchief. Well, that would make it plain enough that you are not from around here then.

Ursula twitched her shoulders up some. Why? Just cuz I don't go see your old museum?

If you were from around here you would have had to have gone to the museum. Every kid who ever went to school anywhere around here has gone to the museum, most of them twice a year since before they could spell.

Didn't say I went to school here, did I? And I already said—

You did not say you were from here, did you? Just asked me, right?

Yeah, that's what I did. Suppose so.

The fields changed momentarily, sounds dropped, color washed out. A cloud edged the sun, passed. Ursula said: Just thought I'd probably seen everybody that's been here sometime. That's all.

I thought the same.

I meant it more friendly-like than it sounded, she said.

He watched her a moment before answering. You know the folks that live there? he said, pointing out of the truck to the west. He stopped his truck and she stopped walking. A yellow building in the distance was barely discernable over the waves of foxtails.

No, she said.

So you have not heard the raccoon story about them either, then?

No. Don't even know who you're talking about.

You must have heard the bear story though, surely? It is pretty much the same story, only this first part, the raccoons and all being the preamble. . . .

Nah, I ain't heard any of that. Least not by those names, so far as I recall. She crumpled her features and looked back down from where he was pointing. Raccoons and bears? Didn't even know there was bears around here.

Bear, dear. Singular.

…

You would likely remember if someone told you about it before, I think. I will tell you it, if you like.

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When the story came to its conclusion, after a long spell of attentiveness, Ursula asked him: You telling me I can actually go and see this thing?

People have been known to, though it usually seems to occur more when they are not trying to. As often happens with things of this type I believe, yes. People see her when they do not mean to. I do not know if the opposite has been true.

Want to go out there with me?

Out to where?

Where *she* is, and try and see her.

Absolutely not. And are you going to pitch off into who-knows-where in the woods with some stranger you just met because of some story like that?

Yeah, stranger—whatever. It's real, isn't it? Not just some stupid story, right? What you're telling me, you believe it, don't you?

As real as any other one I know. But still, I—

And I know you enough to know that you're harmless, near-stranger or not.

Of course that is true, but you do not know that, he said. Plus, well, I would not think it would be all that easy in the first place, even if one were to go—that is to say, I mean, I am *not* going. But, if one did, there is not just one spot she is supposed to be, at viewing hours or something of the sort. One would not even know where to start.

That don't bother me none, and I know enough about things to know you would be fine to be out there with. Her face was up and her arms crossed behind the small of her back. Know it, she said.

Should it not be yourself you should be worried about being fine?

She looked directly to the truck cab for the first time in a while. I've known plenty of you before.

What, what does. . . . What do you mean by that?

I just met you before, is all. Ursula turned, tilted her head back and stared up at the moving clouds. As someone else, sure. But it was you alright.

He was without immediate reply.

If you don't want to go out there, fine. I'm not offended or anything, she said. Otherwise I'd of not asked in the first place.

. . .

Why don't you offer me a ride into town already?

You are headed into Battawa?

That's where you're going, yeah? You can tell another local tale while we're driving. Educate this foreigner.

He nodded his shiny head in assent. As she passed around the front end of the truck the engine died. He cranked the starter and the engine came back up, and as she climbed in, the vehicle had regained its running shudder. Ursula went on: Unless you think it might be too dangerous for me, riding with a stranger the likes of you. . . .

You are in here already, are you not?

Yeah, suppose so. Just didn't want to make you uncomfortable, what with me throwing my wellbeing to the winds and all.

No, no. I am perfectly comfortable with your safety and whatever else, thank you.

Good, she said. She rearranged herself in the seat and said: Come to think of it, why don't you let me drive. That way you can be even more comfortable in your gossiping and all, not distracted by the road and searching for plot points and such, yeah?

He looked over at her. You got a license?

Not on me.

Anywhere?

I suppose not.

I did not suppose so either. He put the truck in gear.

Whatever. There ain't ever cops out this way anyways. It'll be fine.

Because you know everything around here so well, correct?

That's right. Look, we can switch when we get up by Finckle's place, then you drive us in to town from there, no problem.

I assume, what with your long and practiced driving experiences, you can drive manual?

No, I don't *know*, par say, how to drive stick—but only for not trying.

Right. He started the truck down the road.

I must of walked three-four miles already, she said. And it feels like most of it was while you were talking at me. I could have been done with what I'm doing by now if you'd of just drove me into town from the start.

What are you doing?

Just getting groceries is all.

Well, guess the story there just ran away with me. Or me with it, a little bit.

Yeah, you could say that, she said.

You should have stopped me and asked for the ride if you wanted it. Did not realize I was going on at such length, sorry to hold you up. Where are you coming from out here anyway?

Just walking. And I didn't want to interrupt I guess. Your story. That was so. . . . It was pretty long. Still, it was pretty okay.

It is indeed. I am glad you liked it.

Ursula squirmed in her place and adjusted the rug beneath her that covered the cracked vinyl upholstery of the truck's bench seat. She couldn't do it very well because he was sitting on the other side of the rug. Can't believe you ain't curious enough to go out there and try to see it though, she said. See *her*.

I believe it enough already just to tell it and leave it at that. I have no need to be going out there into the woods in the middle of the night to see any old thing.

Any old thing? Man, you're crazy! A bear that's a ghost? Or even just a bear. . . .

He shrugged by way of response and remained silent.

A ghost, good damn. How could I of never heard about it before?

Happened a long time ago, things like that just used to happen in the past. People stop talking about them.

Please. You're not just pulling my leg, cuz of what I said about how you talk or whatever?

He shook his head and she let it drop. He forgot to start up on any new story and she forgot to ask after another. They drove on in silence and shortly came up to the road that headed into town proper. As they turned down the long wood-lined lane, a pack of animals appeared a hundred yards up the path, clogging the thruway, accompanied by their herdesses—curious little village girls that both passenger and driver knew. Or at least knew of. They traded a brief word about the family, Raymond saying their name and where they lived and Ursula saying: Yeah. The truck was forced to coast again.

Know what time it is? she asked him.

Cannot say that I do, he said, the truck pulling to a full stop and he coughing after his answer. Billowing airborne formations of dust swept over the vehicle. They didn't roll the truck windows up, but just sat through the dirt, for the heat would have been more oppressive than the floating roadside debris.

Squinting in the direction of the sun, flatly, Ursula said: I got to get on then.

Here, let me give you this. . . . He reached over to the glove compartment and pulled out a silver, rose-inscribed cigarette clasp. It is a card for the museum, he said, pulling one out of the case. The museum which, incidentally, is in the same building I live in, as you will no doubt recall. I will write my name on it and you show it to Meredith. She runs the museum now.

Ursula accepted it. This get me in for free?

It is always free.

So why do I show her the card?

So she will know that I sent you.

Why?

She will know who you are then. Or that you know me, I mean. She likes to know, that is all. Just show it to her, she and I are close and she will like it if you do. So will I.

Okay, whatever you say. She put her hand to the door handle.

Perhaps after you see the museum we could have tea? he said. Meredith and I always do, we have tea at four, you could come then or, no—come before if you want to see the museum things.

. . .

I think you would like some of the exhibits, and they have a fantastic mold of a—of *the* rather, of *the* bear's track. A paw in mud. And you could ask Meredith about that too, she is almost as up on the local stories as I am. Do you know Meredith? Here, let me see that card back a second if you please.

He took the card and wrote *Tea at Four sharp*. As he handed it back to her the truck's engine stalled once again. He turned his keys back. Perhaps you will come and tell us some story of yours, he said.

Yeah, sure. She cracked the door and jumped down from the pickup seat into a boom of dust.

Say, so where is it that you are staying here in lovely Battawa?

She spread her dress down along her sides. Can't say.

Hm. Why is that, may I ask?

Cuz people ain't suppose to know about it, that's why.

I see. Mystery. Easy to become boring without a little of that. . . . Hope it is nothing too serious though.

Serious? No.

I am just being nosy, right?

Ursula looked back at him through the opened passenger door, her left foot still on the broken asphalt and the rest of her leaned toward the ditch. He was just about to start speaking again, but she broke in before him: I know lots of people. Most folks, I thought. Here at least. And I'm housesitting for a friend's family now. It ain't mysterious, they just don't want people knowing they're gone and all, and that I'm there alone. But I don't care about that. So there you go.

Hm, okay. Sorry, just being a busybody, he said. The dust was getting worse as the animals got further from them, and he began coughing again.

Okay then, she said. I'm off.

Wait. I was trying to ask you. So, uh. . . . You know all these people here, yes? So, who is it that you like?

What do you mean, *like*?

You know, of all these people you know, who do you get on with? Friends, that sort of thing. I am just trying to figure out how it is that I have not heard of you being around before now.

Ursula scratched the back of her head with her left hand and looked away from him up toward the group obstructing the road. Listen. Don't mean to be rude, but I really need to be going.

When she glanced back into Raymond's truck he was turned toward his window and the field beyond. Excuse me, he said. If, and I will take you on your honor on this—if you meant what you said earlier.

What?

He didn't seem to have heard her, and just went on, staring out his open window as he spoke: If I do speak as different as you think, different to the point that you thought that I was not from around here—why, I should suppose that that would be as near and as nice of a compliment as anyone has paid me anytime recently. I hope that you will accept my apologies for being short and suspicious of your intent—an ugly thing, thinking you were being malicious.

One condition, she said. He turned. Will you write that out for me, that story of yours about this ghost-bear?

Sure. I could, I—

And mail it to me. That's part of it too. I like to get things like that in the mail sometimes.

Yes.

I'll drop a address off when I drop by your museum. So I accept—you're forgiven and, goodbye. Got to go.

And she made to walk off, only to turn after a few steps. He was sitting there, strangely solemn. His fingers were interlaced, palms up, resting on his stomach. His head was drooped forward, and he looked completely absorbed in contemplating the appearance of his hands. After a moment he started whispering to himself, and he didn't seem to notice that she was still there.

Hey.

He looked up and smiled when he saw her. Yes.

If you can tell it without making a epic of it, tell me who yours is.

Who mine is what?

Who's your favorite townie. Who you get on with, like you were asking me.

Raymond leaned back in his seat, his body fully disengaged from the steering wheel as he sucked his gut in away from it and grinned brightly: Why, I would say, as of right this moment now—right now, my favorite now would be, well. . . . You have potential. Everyone else, nice people as many of them may be—it is that I already know all their stories.

I don't like tea. You have anything else to drink at your tea?

We certainly may.

Okay, she said. She smiled, half-curtsied. Rising up, she nodded to him: Bye.

Do be sure to come round and you— but she was on her way, and this time she didn't turn back to answer. Dust of the lane before them fled over the asphalt in visible undulations. Swept against her motion toward the crowd, the underclouds padded her way, enveloped her wake.

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She approached the procession. Two towheaded village girls rode a short, depression-thin cow as an older girl walked in front of the herd sawing away at a homemade fiddle, coming upon something melodic once every several dozen phrases: *OOOWW UUUAA RRRI!* The smallest of the girls kept loudly insisting that the cow was an ox, *her* ox. She rode on, sing-shouting out her claim: *Ox-Ox-Ox-Ox-Ox.*

The group was flanked by two mares that followed back off the sides of the road, but no one rode the horses. Between the ox-cow and mares the space there was crammed with goats—nannies, wethers and kids, all intermingling and about—near two hundred head spilling over the thoroughfare, munching on the ditch sides and being funneled forward, the horses backing them and then some more girls in the rear, shadowing everyone. One of the girls in the back was riding a yellow junkyard bicycle and playing a flute at the same time.

The ox-cow wore a bell around its neck that clanged arrhythmically in company with the bow scrapings, the reeded breaths and bleatings. The animal staggered on amidst the uproar, voicing bellows muted by its mouth-bit and the surrounding clamor. The girls astride its back grasped the horns or hide of the beast for balance while the reins were left to drag in the dust. The horses behind had no equipage on them, nor were they even shoed. Tailing the goats and cow, riderless and ambling on, the mares seemed the principal herding intelligence. Back of horses and in front of the bike riding flautist, an older girl kept two others in step. She held onto a hand of each, and trailing behind her, they held hands with one another.

All of the girls wore masks, and all of them nearly identical—gray furred faces, countenances of a family of fox. Some wore them proper, eyes to eyes and preserved snouts extending out from where their girl-noses were. Some wore them propped up on their foreheads, doublefacing themselves. The smallest girl had hers backwards, its gaze sighting out Ursula as she approached the group from the roadway behind. This little one atop the ox-cow swiveled around to acknowledge Ursula as she came up, asking her name and then repeating it over and over—*Franny-Franny-Franny*—not in a cruel way, but simply as an addition to the already abundant music of their movement.

The other girl on the ox had turned around too, but stayed silent, peering back occasionally and breaking into quick smiles whenever Ursula caught her eyes. More of a sly look than shy. Plantlife was fixed in her hair, interwoven, mostly weeds and such rather than proper flowers, and so it was with some of the other girls as well, their hair falling down around their shoulders, flaxen-like yellow and unwashed, bulging out around mask straps in tangled arrangements. Wildflowers and weeds.

Marching up at the side of the fiddler was a scraggy little boy who Ursula hadn't noticed at first. Not a menacing cloud in the early dusking sky, he carried a black umbrella and darted back and forth across the road behind the musician, changing which side of her he shadowed, folding and unfolding the umbrella as he went. He wore no mask and no shirt and along the furrows of his small surface-visible ribs one could see where another set of bones had been colored on him in paint—a teal skeleton on top of his boy skeleton. There were adornments in his hair too.

When he caught sight of Ursula, the boy made a series of vulgar faces at her. The loud little girl on the ox-cow saw some of this display, traced its object back to Ursula, and then promptly threw and hit him in the face with a cluster of grapes that she had been feeding to her riding partner and herself. The boy glared back, but said nothing. The other rider, still preoccupied and being play-shy with Ursula, she hadn't noticed any of this. When she asked for another bite from the vine, the backwards-headed foxlet burst out in a speech, espousing to her (and loud enough so that everyone could hear it, even over the serious racket they were making) just what it was that the boy had done to deprive them of the rest of their fruit. Some of the goats had noticed straight away and the grapes were well within them by now. With no one really paying attention to her, the little girl proceeded on in a rangy diatribe against the boy, threatening his expulsion from their daily marches if he couldn't behave himself around company.

Ursula wasn't sure that she could be company, just walking by them on the road and all, and she was partway into saying so, but everything she said was drowned out by the other noises, especially the power mad little one on the ox. Flashing vivrious teeth in a disquieting grin, the backward-visaged dictator spun about on her mount to face her new acquaintance. Ursula decided it would be best to say nothing. She smiled back.

Ursula moved across the parade through their numbers, stopping to pet some of the kids who were inert enough for it and not totally filthy, dodging hooves and buttings when necessary. After a few minutes she turned off into a field of recently shorn cane grass that bordered the town's outskirts. Even to her rough-worn feet, the cut remains of the crop were sharp. Glancing over toward the girls she saw them all at once from the side, the littlest one gazing out at her, eyes fixed with the attachment of an animal, lacking the self-consciousness of *why look away*—and when their eyes met, Ursula stumbled.

Above the broken velvet of the newly rising buds that dotted the ground, leftovers of the sugar harvest, sawn down stalks still lay in the field—such a stalk had tangled her and left her

barely able to steady herself and stay upright. She looked back and the girl was watching her the same as before. She shrugged, gave a short wave as she turned away. She trudged on into the field and straightened the left strap of her dress which had fallen from her shoulder. By the time she exited the far side her feet were scratched and hurt, the left bloodied. The field gave out onto a corner lot adjacent the general store. Through its dull wasted expanse she went, stepping gingerly on the pebbles of ground asphalt that covered its breadth, weaving her way between the parked freight trailers and parched nettles that populated its space.

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Providing haberdashery of all sorts, the Franklins' was an old Victorian house converted into a one-stop storefront. Situated just off the highway, the building serviced the locale as a kind of outland depot where most needs within reason could be met. When investment in the store came to profit, the proprietors went about acquiring the surrounding land, and after deeds had changed hands, razed the structures thereon. Covered with quarter-sized stones and erratic patches of vegetation, the lots were left vacant, unmarked parking for local motorists and passing semis. Boarding rooms that were sectioned off in the older parts of the house could be rented daily or weekly, but most passers-thru, if they slept at all, did so in their truck cabs.

Set away from the building were six freshly painted gas pumps. Recently installed, they had been designated to this spot after a storm destroyed the only other fueling station in Battawa. The new paint on the pumps was purple and gold and it had been done up in stripes by an unsteady hand. Even though they had been told that such an idea had no grounding in geological science, the Franklins had not wanted the underground tanks all that close to their already spotty wells, and so the fuel pumps had been built a good hundred and fifty feet from the building, leaving a broad stretch of barren lot between the stations and their attendants inside. The house wells were just to the other side of the building, and science or no, they went brackish three months after the installation of the underground reservoirs. In order to shelter even the largest of diesel rigs, the canopied ceiling above the pumps rose to an elevation equaling that of the third floor of the old house. Pennants whipped the sky in the canopy's eaves above the stripped landscape, the distanced building the only other permanent structure in sight, off-white paint withering away from the clapboard siding.

The original building had been extended eastward with a lengthy metal-sheeted addition that made the construction look at odds with itself—an aged genteel Victorian with a veritable modernist barn sutured to its side, a conglomeration of dignity and crass metallics—a mature and gallant Sarus Crane, its fine leg caught in the steel foothold of a poacher's trap. The addition served the public, housing grocery, deli and kitchen. A run of sunflowers along a wall of the house slumped, heads too heavy for their stems. Ursula lifted one up and pulled out some seeds.

She positioned herself at the side of the new addition, sitting on the sidewalk there between the store's entrance and the cement apron that ran out and connected the pumps. Feet jutting out before her, she studied the tiny stones and seashell fragments that were mixed into the concrete batter of the curb. The shoes she had borrowed lay beside her, one on its side, the other heel up. Beyond the cuts and chafes of ankles and calves, the lines of her bare legs stretched there, holding a certain marbled way—possessed of a fractured, preternatural physique. She tossed the sunflower seeds out onto the cement, one at a time.

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Several people walked by her quickly, not saying a word. The first person she looked up at was a young woman who was crossing the loose-rocked lot to the south, a child in her arms. Heat roiled off the stones, creating serpentine distortions that veiled the approaching pair. The kid was wearing an oversized flowery dress that she kept pulling up over her head. The woman was plain, with a body described by a singular downward curvilinearness—she clasped the child tightly around the bum, pale infant skin on sun-browned forearm. Set in opposition with the surroundings, the pair were absolutely idyllic in appearance—mother and offspring, pressed together, full of life and new purpose—an image that fit with the history of the place and the present scene they composed.

Decades past, the building there had served as the maternity home of the parish seat, a sanctuary for unwed mothers. As makeshift as it had been when in operation, the house had served dutifully in that capacity, supporting community and parish for years on end. Much as all else though, what had been a pillar of charity and witness to the start of many a local generation, this merciful organization had gone the way of the general fortune in the area: the parish seat relocated fifty miles to the north, mirroring the local industry, and most people cast away—to cities or death or further outskirts. And so now: Franklins' & Franklins' Fuel. The woman holding the child slowed, met eyes with Ursula and came up.

What's the trouble honey? she said, squinting down at the figure sitting there on the curb.

Oh nothing, no trouble. How're you today?

Fine, just fine. The kid squirmed in her arms and the woman shifted the child to her other side. Now that they were closer Ursula saw that the woman had a row of small red sores on her lower lip, and the kid's dress was greatly stained, not flowery. When woman continued, the afflicted skin seemed to flare as she spoke, giving her expression a bit of a pout. You want something from inside? she asked.

No.

No? The woman brushed hair out of her face to have a better look at Ursula, but as she did so the kid reached for the rearranged tuft of tan curls. It took a moment before the woman got her locks out of the child's grubby hand. Ursula smiled at the kid and the kid at her. The child's teeth and those of the woman were strangely similar, slightly separated and round.

Actually, maybe. Would you mind? Ursula said.

Sure.

Could you tell Jay to come out here for me? Can't go in myself, on account of my shoes.

Looks to me like your feet is more your problem than your shoes, the woman replied.

They ain't my shoes.

Oh. Who's this Jay then?

The Franklins' adopted cousin, Ursula said. Her response resulted in a blank look from the woman. The kid covered her little face and then fanned the curtain of her hand to look out. The Franklins, who own the store. . . .

…

He's one of the boys in there at the registers.

Okay.

Just tell him Frances is outside.

That all?

Yep. Thanks. What's your little girl's name there?

She's Kayla, but she ain't mine. She's just my sis. Kayla? Say hello to Ms. Frances there Kayla. . . . The kid curled up into her sister's armpit, trying to be unseen. Oh, don't mind her

none, she is just the shy one today, ain't you been? Been pulling your dress on up over your head all day too, just so as not to be seen, ain't you? Don't yet know that don't so much actually work. The little girl squirreled around some more. Seems to always fancy being alone. . . . That, or if she can't, she's trying to be hid. That's weird in a kid I think, huh? The little girl was quiet and still shrinking up against the larger body.

Don't she like to be petted or funned with at all?

Oh, she likes it fine alright for awhile, just she likes to be hiding most of all. The kid peaked and retreated. Most fun in the world for her so far, if it is fun. I don't know. But then her world ain't very old or big yet either. Well, listen. I'll tell him you're out here like you said. It urgent or anything?

No, not especially.

Okay then. I'll tell him when we check out. The woman said this with a smile that traveled from Ursula back to the kid cocooning into her side. We won't be but a minute anyway, that okay?

Sure, sounds fine. Thank you. And *you too*. . . .

The little girl squealed. Hid.

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The brass clanging of bells sounded as the door whisked shut behind the woman and child. The plating of the door was the sole exception to the expanse of sheet metal that covered the public section of the building, and the darkened glass in the doorframe shook each time someone released it back into its closing yawn. Ursula glanced at the door over her shoulder only to see the fuel pumps and parking lot that were out before her. Distorted by the poorly applied black tint, reflected images took on curves and waves over the pasted-up adverts on the door, colors alight and drifting in the backdrop, framing—her form the centerpiece of the mirrored scene.

People had begun to arrive for the evening meal in the dining hall. The traffic was brisk and at its height for the day, noticeably increasing as she sat there. When the woman came back out she gave Ursula a simple nod and moved on, a bag of groceries in the crook of her left arm and Kayla in her right, the child dozing. After another ten minutes, Jay exited. She gave him a little salute and asked if he was busy.

Yeah, supper and all. He stood there looking down over her and then turning out toward the filling stations. What did you do to your feet? he asked, looking back down at her legs after he said it.

That's why I didn't come in. Didn't want to mess up these shoes.

Whose are they?

Mrs. Robin's.

How'd you do that to your feet?

Cane grass walking here.

Why'd you walk across it then?

Just trying to get my body to shut up, she said, her head down and smiling at herself. It'll learn. Couldn't very well wear the heels through the field either. Probably wouldn't of survived, me or the shoes. Only brought them to wear inside anyhow. But I am fine out here. . . . You got time to fill a order for Tel and me?

Hang on a second, he said.

Jay was the reason the system worked, her and Telly's system. It worked because he was always there at the store, and he would always go hunt the any-number of disparate items for an order out from the crooks and corners of the storehouse. A few minutes later he emerged from the building with a pair of tennis shoes and a rag. He pulled a pair of tube socks out of a shoe: Had these in my backpack, they're clean. You can wipe your feet off with this. It might sting some, I wetted it with disinfectant.

Aw, thanks boy scout.

She raised the left foot lethargically to have a look at her ankle. Jay glanced back toward the black-tinted door. When his gaze returned to her she was at the *–out* of repeating *scout* and lowering her leg. She was on the *–ree* of *twenty-three* when he caught her foot with his right hand, just below her ankle and just above the curb.

So scout, was wondering then, can we have a number sixteen and a twenty-three—

This'll probably hurt. . . . They exchanged looks before he lowered his eyes. Should I do it for you?

She didn't say anything, but nodded assent. He brought the cloth across her cuts. On the first pass she drew a quick breath. She closed her mouth and remained motionless for the rest. When he was through, he placed her bare foot back down on the warm concrete.

You aren't bleeding on the other?

No, not as I can tell.

Jay was redheaded, as pale as that would generally imply, and slightly on the chubby side. Being briefly out in the heat of the falling day and finished with the task at hand, he had become exaggeratedly flushed, thin streams of sweat beading down his cheeks. He placed the rag on her right knee, stood up, and wiped the perspiration under his nose toward a wispy sideburn. She pushed the rag down her calf, clearing away streaks of dirt.

I got to get back in to the register. You can wear these shoes if you don't feel like wearing them others. Your foot don't look so bad now.

Yeah, thanks.

A number sixteen and a twenty-three, right?

Yep. Sixteen-twenty-three.

It'll take me a bit to get stuff around.

That's fine. Be in in a minute.

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After relaying her grocery numbers, Ursula would always go and seat herself at one of the long tables in the dining section. Not to order anything or eat, but just to wait for the bags to be put together and to rest. From the moment she entered the store, diners' glances would orbit around her, especially out-of-town male glances. Once when she had come in, a grackle had jumped in the door with her. As it flew around the store enacting all manner of mischief, even then some of the attention had remained on her.

Men from the mills over in Tarin came here to eat their evening meals for the same reason a few came here to live—Battawa being considerably less expensive than Tarin, if less engaging. Most mill hands that roomed in Battawa had migrated to the area for the work. They lived hand-to-mouth, paycheck to paycheck, mailing off any surplus funds they could come by. Groups pitched together and lived in overcrowded rentals to save money. Rooms were

partitioned off with sheets and quilts to maximize sleeping quarters, and the worst of them held to the same schedule as the manufactories, men taking shifts to fill each bed over the course of a day. Ides Street housed a row of such establishments, the landlord a relative of the family that owned the Tarin matchstick mill.

The door chimes announced her. Factory men broke with their food and chatter to size her up. Most were shortly back to their plates and talk. At the Franklins', Ursula would try and look only at people who weren't looking at her. She sat and ignored most folks, shut off, occasionally sneaking glances and eavesdropping on the oldsters who didn't care who she was or what she looked like. Characters present this evening to distract and capture Ursula's attention, one table over from where she seated herself: Gustav, Demi's Earl and Jim Beans. None of them had looked up when she came in the door.

Jim Beans sat facing the other two, shoveling mashed up combinations of food into his mouth. He would jaw and laugh, barely listening to the others, occasionally spewing small pieces of his meal out onto the table with his more forceful proclamations. A coiled, flesh-colored machine was fixed into his ear, amplifying the world into his head. In addition to this miracle gadget, he wore a striped and stained sepia polo shirt, pleated khaki shorts, track shoes (spikes removed), a neon golf visor, and white beard stubble accentuated with traces of his meal—prominently, dark roux. Tipping the visor back up on his head, he paused from forking his meal past his corn-colored teeth to take a drag off one of the Pall Mall 100s that burned steadily at his side throughout the meal. Beneath the resilient hairline of his gray buzz cut, Jim Beans' forehead sported a pink indentation where the band of his visor had been. He started another cigarette from the one he was actively smoking, the current cigarette having well passed its midway point. Both burned on in the notches of the ashtray as he turned back to his plate.

Bringing a round white radish up toward his jaw, Jim Beans reported to his companions some wisdom he had acquired from a radio news program in the early a.m. of the day before: Eggplants is good for colon cancer.

The whole radish disappeared and then select parts of it reappeared as Demi's Earl, in his solemn-faced and unconscious sagacity, replied: Yep, that cancer, you can't turn your back on it.

Jim Beans laughed, choked, took a drag and choked some more. Gustav merely smiled and placed the paper napkin that had been in his lap onto the table, politely concealing the partial reemergence of Jim Beans' radish which had found its way to the empty place-setting before him.

Gustav was one of the more sophisticated of the town drunks—always being drunk, and even so, still able to operate in a more or less normative and conscionable fashion. Almost without exception, his scent was the only part of his person offensive to polite society, tempered as it was with the fumes of mid-level bourbon and tobacco. Gustav did not speak often, and even more rarely did he speak at length; perhaps this was the very trick that he so adeptly employed to attain such even civility. He leaned back, enjoying a thin and moderately malodorous cigar, the last three fingers of his smoking hand fanned out daintily as he pinched the drag end of the panatela between his yellowed index finger and thumb. Much like Ursula, Gustav was not here to eat. He was here just as companion to his fellow sitters, and he nodded along with their talk, avoiding eye contact throughout and occasionally uttering a low-voiced affirmation or denial, augmenting what the others had said. An accent of unknown origin was detectable in his voice when he would say *Thank you*, one of his more recurrent phrases.

When Gustav happened to see Ursula here at supper he smiled at her, but he was certainly not a party with the many leerers of the dining hall who do the same. He smiled politely

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and that was all. Gustav was not a winking man. His temperament being as it was, it would seem that this would have be true regardless of the following: one of those eyes of his was not an eye. It was glass. While not the sort to show off, he had been known to produce this prosthetic in hand if a younger child were to inquire about it with dignity. Those were the situations when the most speech could be wrought out of him—talking to youth, describing how the false eye was made and where it came from and why it was a shell and not a ball like most kids would think, sometimes even relating how it was that he came to have the need of it. Ursula hadn't yet heard that, she wasn't young enough.

Gustav took a pull off of the iced tea bottle that sat on the floor beside him. He then gently dabbed at the black vest he wore (sans undershirt) where he seemed to believe he had spilled some of the liquid. Tidied to his satisfaction, he placed the paper napkin back on the table with no noticeable discoloration on its crumpled whiteness. Whenever Gustav spoke, Demi's Earl had to reiterate the response for Jim Beans.

He said, *Yes!* Demi's Earl shouted to Jim Beans. Habitually, when thinking of what to say next or what he'd said last, Demi's Earl made a sucking sound with his teeth to fill the pause, and so he did after he had restated Gustav's pronouncement to Jim B—*Sssfft.*

Demi's Earl was the leading conversationalist amongst his pals—Jim Beans being too divided between other oral activities, Gustav silent and intent on the remaining quantity of drink in the iced tea bottle—and so Earl's thoughts were allowed free reign, and the talk of the group was consequently frequented with many interludes of sucking of the teeth. *Sssfft*—and then Demi's Earl went on, and loudly: Just saw my big old boy Vic Henry's new limb, what looks like a cannon. I say he's darn lucky they blown that other one off for him. That new leg of his, if there's any way to improve on Good God's designs, that there might just be it. Wouldn't surprise me none if them square-headed limb surgeons got themselves on the invite end of a lightning bolt from the upward for the good they done with it, contending as they themselves are. . . .

Earl had once had a neighbor named Henry, a Victoria was once his grammar school teacher for half a year, and while there was not such a thing as Vic Henry (or Vic Henry's new limb), Earl's friends found no fault with his story and had yet to interrupt him. *Sssfft.* That was the way of Demi's Earl—people became other people, time coursed freely, heedless of direction, and stories lost their heads. Little over a year past, Earl had been released from a home and had come here to live with his great-niece Demi. He frequently called her Sue, a name she'd never possessed before meeting him again, late in life. There were three other Susans in his extended family, none of whom he remembered by that name, if at all.

Dead ten years, Earl's son-in-law (a man by the name of Jonathan Havlek) had been buried with an artificial leg that he'd had since he was a boy. Earl's vagabond mind had excavated to borrow it. It was a fine leg and Demi's Earl went on, lauding its qualities: Made from irons and polymers, and black-black as the proudest night, yes. And much as another appendage belonging to Quintin's Godson had Rudolph's scrawl down its glossy blackened side, Vic's leg has also gotten some writing going down the side of it of inspirational words to buck him up when he is sad about having to use it, having no other choices about the using of anything else, for—*He hath not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted*—thank Him indeed for that at least. Could we all be here without? No, as why then would we've even bothered to put on clothes in the first place and live beyond the giant lizards with our machines that come out of our bodies into the world as we come from the earth, the earth from the beyond, and so on. *Sssfft.* Our clothes help us do that because our clothes are our houses and our bodies of stone and paper money and soap and syringes and really—why have them if we're not suffering, cold without

them, and who doesn't mind us having them as that is the generous and infinite gesture which nothing has stopped it yet—if you don't bother about death, which can be bothered by very little in the world that's know of in the world, except in us. I saw a baby dog dressed in clothes the other day because it was cold, and rightly so—it being mothered by folks now rather than by its mother bitch. And folks recognize it, just like those boys raised on wild by dogs. They didn't give him no clothes because they didn't recognize clotheslessness as suffering and they were warm enough to eat and show him how and not to eat him, apparently. Suffering is accorded by awareness and He is unable to be hateful as He is not aware, and so does avoid looking down and scorning us in our pains I believe, and that is a relief to me at least, as it would be awful to be looked on so—and the proof of it being that it isn't something I could abide within a state of any comfort, though in the here and now that is something I am able to be doing. *Sssfft*. Quintin's Godson was choked to death for money with his nice inlaid words, but these here words on Vic Henry's leg are of an altogether finer type, as I've just been at saying, and comfort to be had through them in a more wholesome fashion. Pee-ess-two-two-two-four it says, though I haven't been to my tissue papers yet to check the rest of it, no doubt it goes on beautifully, as will he who sings it with his body as my boy now does. Beauty and luck to him, some of him having an escaping and gotten on and went ahead and that, with the rest of him still here that will be but along presently soon enough. And so he's given to multiple voyages of the body. His in a way of no one else and this could be the same thing as when we all say it, yes? *Sssfft*. Yes, losing things is much like finding them, as is found with the more of it you've had. And breathing is in or out, but really both. Like eating or using eyes.

He is the tail of his life, which ends up in his mouth, he says. He says: Let me see one of them radishes. Ursula returned a smile and nod from Gustav and then looked elsewhere. Other diners were less amusing.

Used to contending with the factory workers in the dining hall, she was well prepared for their attentions, even knew some of them individually by now and knew how to cool them off to best effect. Truckers though, not being from around here, sometimes they still bugged her a bit. If any customers got to be too forward in making her acquaintance, Jay would materialize with a fountain soda or something leftover from the kitchen as an excuse to interrupt. People flitted in through the door, bells rang, workers glanced over toward the newcomers. Athletic stockings and heels lay tucked under the table beside the unlaced tennis shoes on her feet. She sat by herself messing with stuff out of her dress pocket, listening to the group of old men talk their nonsense. Even though no one was paying any inordinate or particular attention to her, Jay came by with a cola (extra syrup and a maraschino).

Mirrors covered the entire southern wall of the dining hall. Ursula watched the room as Jay passed red and white-checked tablecloths on his way back to the storerooms. By the time he had collected the order, the smell of fried catfish from the kitchen had wafted through the dining room and settled into the fabric of her dress.

What are you doing tonight?

Working.

After that.

I don't know. Nothing.

You ever been out in that patch of woods west of here?

Gone out there hunting boar. Once, when I was kid.

You ever hear anything about there being bears?

❁ ❁ ❁

The mailbox at the Vents' was a miniature replica of their house, a mid-century staple of crayon blue with white shutters, the flag down, its mouth open and empty. It even had the house number displayed by its painted-on front door. Ursula put her grocery bags down beside the white pillar of the postbox and withdrew the lost journal from her pocket. The nude celebrity photo came out as well, the image-side stuck to the journal. She peeled it off, opened the booklet and started flipping through. After paging over various drawings and notes, she set the picture in the fortress-of-muscles section, only then seeing the small, near-invisible penciled dedication inscribed on the paper back of the photograph. She shook the picture out to inspect the flowery handwriting, but had only gotten this far—

Gilded B.B.,
I fear we've come to

—when from out of the sky she was struck, a sharpness ricocheting off her left ribs. Another something striking and skipping across the road. . . .

What! shouted above her, from the distance. Montgomery Vents in an upper window of the house. When she looked up he shot something else at her, missing badly.

Can't believe you hit me. I mean, that you can hit anything. Must of been luck.

I can do it again if you want, he said.

Yeah?

Sure.

Shoot.

He did, and missed again. A small, folded-up paper bird lay at her feet. It had been weighted inside so that it could fly to her. He took another shot with his slingshot as she leaned down to retrieve the ammunition. He hit the mailbox with an eraser shaped like a crocodile. The empty bullet casing he had sent out first turned in a half-circle where it had stopped going on the other side of the road.

This has *I love you* written all over it, she shouted. In your punk-dumb language, anyway. But I know that can't be true. . . . She waved the journal above her head so that he could see it, her eyes still trained down on the projectile, turning it over carefully to see how it was built. If she had looked up she would have seen his face blanch, but she didn't. She tucked the blue book under her armpit and set to unfolding the paper to see what was inside.

Thought I'd just stop by, return your diary to you. But now, I don't know. . . . Think I know some other smelly twerp who might be interested. Could give it him instead, just as easy. Might want to know who hearts who around him, and all. He'd appreciate it, you think?

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him looking seasick and huge-eyed. He said nothing and peered down—straight down, not at her. Let him squirm another ten seconds . . . five . . . enough.

She tossed the journal down onto the wasted paper bird in the dirt, its heart-stone already torn out and hers. She rolled the old clay marble across her knuckles. I liked your drawings. Thanks for the marble.

Further down the street, a boy with bowl-cut blonde hair was spading the sod out of a yard into a wheelbarrow that sat on the sidewalk.

Why're you doing that? Ursula asked.
I hate green, he said.

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Three blocks from the town square the houses became older and poor, the lights from parlors and dining rooms pressed out window frames dully and disappeared as they merged with the dusk. Dogs were loose in the streets and children chased them around, yelling and shrieking, grabbing at their tails and being chased in turn. Broken glass was distributed across the asphalt in starburst patterns. Snatches of radio broadcasts and the sounds of people singing and fighting drifted through the streets, underscored by the clatter of cookery and laughter from kitchen windows. A practicing trombonist stood on a rooftop making scales and shouting down to people on the street who called out to him. A wispy cloud of lilac smoke issued from a back door, assisted by women beating washrags and potholders in its wake, fanning it out.

The siren of a little girl's teary wail rose dominant over all other noise as an adolescent carried the child through an alley to an inflatable kiddy pool. A plastic neon ball bounced before a cross-armed boy who was leaning against the house nearest the pool. He wore a knee length t-shirt wet from swimming and he kicked the ball back toward where it had come from and yelled. Children ran circles around the water and the little girl who had so recently been upset had quieted down some. She put her hands into the pool and splashed water out at a dog and other kids, only remembering to sob and distort her lips intermittently: as the ball skipped past, as someone walked away, as she forgot why she had been crying. She pretended not to see Ursula wave and then tried to throw water all the way out to the street.

For a good while churches crowned the corner of each block. Ursula cut between the old public housing and boarded up rental complexes, through side yards and barren lots. Out of the town center the loose dogs and kids finally trailed off and gave up following her. Shortly the clustered buildings ceased and the architecture of houses became increasingly mannered. The older properties this far from the square had been the city quarters of landowners back when the municipality of Battawa had briefly swelled and incorporated outward, bringing the wealth of the surrounding country into itself. In the ensuing downturn, after the economy shuddered and local fortunes elapsed, the area was left to become what it had been for decades previous, an outskirts—no longer privy to city maintenance, but still subject to its taxes. The prosperity of the town had been so short that there had not been time to rename the streets before there were no funds to do so, and the corroding traffic signs here still claimed the lanes as parish roads. Pillared and spiked metal fences encaged the formerly well-to-do residences, small sculptures, dry fountains and ordered trees in the untended multi-acre lawns. Passing behind a white two-story colonial, she spotted an old man and a boy at work by the estate's summerhouse. On the wrought iron fence of the property there was a plaque mounted to the gate, a mosaic of shells and stones spelling out the family name of the original occupants, letters patterned over with moss.

The man's face was craggy and sun-worked and he had the boy holding a speckled hen still so that its wings could be cut. There were other chickens ranged about above, perched in the sparkleberry limbs that angled away from the porch of the building. Red oak and magnolia canopied the yard, and the clapboard structure beneath was already darkened near to night in shadows. Shifting amongst the small glossy leaves, the chickens impassively watched a whirl of feathers beat up out of the dirt below. One of the birds struck at the branch it sat on and

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wrenched something up into the air, cutting it in half and working the bit down its throat. Shoots of bamboo reached the upper story of the main house on the south side, and struggling palm fronds spilled out of the urn on the fence pillar above Ursula's head. She pulled a single leaf from the lowest shoot and started to fold it up.

The boy's name was Ayo and he was six and wiry and shy. Ursula would oftentimes give him sweets or trinkets from the store when she came by on her way to Telly's. He loved licorice and little plastic figurines of any sort. The old man had gotten upset with the boy when he accepted these things from her, so Ayo and Ursula had grown covert about it. He was always running around the yard toward evening most evenings, and when he would see her he'd run back past the trees and vinegrowth to the far side of the lot to meet up. Not this evening though, and it was just as well that he was busy and could not get away: she had forgotten to use her allowance at the store, and so had nothing for him—had said the same to the kids and dogs that had followed her a few blocks back in town—she forgot today, sorry. The chicken in the boy's arms had quieted down as she passed the trees marking the property boundary, and as she moved away she could hear the *snick* of the man's shears as they broke through the quills and she could hear the man and Ayo speaking quietly to the bird to keep it calm. Feathers drifted through the yard toward bed sheets hung on the clothesline.

A quarter mile down the road Ursula came to a ranch home, long decaying lawn ornaments out front all atilt at happenstance angles, warped and faded salmon-colored siding glimmering fleshly in the setting sunlight. On the worn wooden porch steps four newspapers were piled on each other, stacked in order of the succession of the past days, the morning's on top. The mail slot in the door was duct taped shut and there was an empty trash bin out by the road for the post. Ursula had written *Mailbox* on its lid.

Mrs. Robin's shoes sat on top of the groceries, one in each bag. Ursula tossed the shoes out onto the porch, just a single tomatillo bruised by the two-inch heels. After she readjusted the bags in her arms, she pushed the door open and kicked the old newspapers into the house. The sports section from Thursday hit Luc, Telly's toy dog, squarely in the snoot and sent him sprawling and yipping back into the living room.

While Telly never used the door herself, she never locked it either. Through the whole of her life, her manner had continually gone through seismic shifts. Telly's general outlook at any given time could be traced back to the most direct contact that anyone may have with this world—that of one's own (and in this case, *her* own) body. And how she felt about it; and the drastic alterations it had endured over the years. Since the start of her self-inflicted convalescence of four years ago plus, Telly's body had swelled—much as the wooden back door of her home would in the summer heat—to a point of no longer fitting its frame and sticking every time there was any attempt to use it in a normal fashion. Her weight had more than doubled in the first thousand days of being shut off from the world and she currently carried nearly three times the burden she'd had as a willfully petite high school honor student, a time less than ten years past. The back door had not been opened in at least three years. Ursula came in the front.

Hey, Ursula said, questioning an empty kitchen. The dog yapped on and ran back and forth between foyer and living room.

Vous êtes vivant! was shouted in at her over the sound of the television. It was a habitual turn, and the only foreign phrase of Telly's that Ursula would admit to understanding.

Course I am, she said. Like always. I got your stuff. She eyed Luc and set the bags onto the kitchen floor.

Stay for some food? Telly called out.

Your kids coming?

Telly clucked at that: My kids?

They might as well be.

No, the whole family's en vaccanes, Telly said, rolling the last bit.

What.

Vacationing, holiday. . . .

Why didn't you go with? Ursula asked. She stopped in the archway to brush a fly from her arm and then stepped into the living room. Whereabouts then?

North Florida somewhere, Telly said. Ursula nodded, looked at the TV. They both watched a man running down an alley, sped by swelling strings from the speakers. Telly asked: Séjour pour le dîner, won't you? I made dessert already.

Okay. But no more francophone tonight, yeah? And the TV too. At least the volume. . . .

The picture on the screen swooped into itself with a centering point of light and a hum. Telly put the remote down on herself and said: Frances, you're enough to drive a body to panic with you never being where you should, or saying different. Can hardly get ahold of you when I need you.

Lord, Ursula exhaled. This already? I'm here now, ain't I? And you seem to have done alright without me anyway. I'm not even that late, considering.

Considering what?

. . .

Well, you don't know, Telly said as she rose to put the groceries away. The remote skittered down onto the carpet. It's hard. Tracking you down is becoming like a quest-like undertaking. Ursula laughed at Telly, and Luc wandered in and nosed around her ankles. They moved back to the kitchen together.

It's such a hardship on you, why don't you just do the easy thing already and go about your business for your own self, Ursula said. She knelt down to mess with her sneakers (an excuse to get down and palm the dog away). She loosened the laces of both shoes, and said: If it's that hard on you and all. Not like I'm particularly enjoying it either. You want help putting this stuff away?

No, no—no you just sit down sweetheart, or get yourself something to drink. Ursula sat and Telly fussed in the grocery bags and continued: You could just let me know what you're up to once in a while, couldn't you? And you know why—why I have you get the food and things for me. And why you always keep throwing these little errands in my face, huh? Don't I treat you right for what you do for me? You know I'm in no state to go out there. . . .

Telly had already started chopping away at some ginger, only half a bag of groceries unpacked on the table. Luc pushed up beside Ursula's feet and made a series of whimpers that evoked no response from either of the women. He retreated and reapproached, snuffling erratically at her legs.

Not as if I got nothing better to be doing but being at your beck and call all day, Ursula said. I keep telling you, if you'd just let him, Jay would drop your stuff off—every night if you wanted.

Got your claws out and into him that much, eh?

Nothing to do with no claws. Ursula reared back in her seat: He's just a right nice and proper kid, that's all. As much as anyone is likely to be around here, anyways. And he'd do it much more nicely and regular than I do. And claws out and in—what the hell is that? Think

people can't just be nice of their own selves? Some people actually want to be helpful—*like* helping. You think you got your claws out and in to me, and that's why I'm your food gopher then?

. . .

What—nothing? Nothing to say? Ursula pushed her chair back quick, the legs screaking on the floor. The dog jumped at the sound and then padded up to her feet again. She toed him back and went on: You can't talk to you—can't say anything, you're so touchy.

Frances! We're friends after all. . . .

Yeah? And how did that happen? Don't even think I can recall, or care to neither.

Oh, *pff*. Suit yourself. And who's touchy? All I ask is for hints as to what you're up to so I can get ahold of you. And you talk as if just letting it be known what you're up to, to just lighten my load after all, and not have to chase to all ends of the earth to find you—you act as if it's immoral or something. There's no reason for you being so secretive about it. Are you staying around to eat or not? I'm making the Jafet dish.

Luc barked.

God! Can't you just let him out a little, he's all on my legs half the time pawing me—

Frances—if you weren't teasing him all the time maybe he'd give you a moment of peace if you did the same. The dog squeaked up, as if confirming what his owner just said.

I don't do nothing to that dog and you know it, just try and get him to move around every third time I'm here, especially when he's like now, and aiming to be bearing down on my shins for the rest of the visit. And for his own good anyway. He could get somewhere else, that's all I want—I don't care about the thing enough to be messing with it. Me messing with him! *God*. I'll stay if you put him outside. . . .

You know I can't.

Won't.

Can't. Then he'll be wanting to get out all the time, and I'll have to be calling you over all the more to retrieve him back in for me when he won't come. Come on now—

Fine, *fine*. I'm closing him up in the pantry then—less you got something better for it? That's if you want me to stay for supper that is.

Put him in there already then, he can't do no harm in there. As if he could anywhere! And settle down yourself already for the love of God—you got me all flustered over this nothing with your naggling on about the dog, Mercy Christ Frances. . . . Telly wiped herself theatrically with a dried-out towelette that had been abandoned on the counter. There was a rectangular stain on the space she got it from, edged by a banana peel.

You're the one what's always babying him and spoiling till he isn't fit to be around people, Ursula said. And this the first time I think I ever heard you call him what he is—a dog, you know? It's always: *Lukasz, Lucasta, Lucio, l'il Luc-y Luc, Looky l'il Luc-y Luc*. . . . He's a damn *dog*. And you treat him like he's some kind of royally cupidy godbody or something, so don't go blaming any of that animal's unpleasantness on me.

Hon, I don't know what's got you so stirred up, but—

Nothing. Ursula got up and the mutt followed her. But nothing, she said nonsensically. When she got over to the pantry Luc ran up and she shuffle-kicked him inside and unfolded the sliding accordion door behind him. Dog's just bothering me, that's all. You know how we don't get along.

At least turn the light on in there for him.

Fine. There was a switch over the stove and Ursula flipped it up.

Telly set a pan to boil and ground up sassafras leaves in a marble mortar. Ursula paced around the room fingering the hem of her sweat-stained dress, shuffling her tennis shoes over cracks in the pear-patterned linoleum. The silence between the women was punctuated by a low puling from the pantry. The string of the ceiling fan swung in a small circle while the blades droned above. Eventually Luc quieted down. Crushed powder shook out into a mixing bowl and rinse water hissed in the blue-tongued heat of the ringed stovetop burner.

Leaving her cooking for a moment, Telly handed Ursula a purple bug swatter. She said: Frances, darling. Do do me a favor, will you? Kill some of these flies in here?

For a home that was not often opened, doors or windows, there were a great number of flies inside, and Ursula mumbled a few words to that effect. *Houseflies*, she said almost entirely to herself.

Telly had shuffled over to the table for a look into the still unsorted groceries, and as delicately as one can, through a mouthful of pralines, she asked: What was that you said, hon?

Oh, nothing. . . . Ursula seated herself at the aquamarine and white-pebbled Formica table and laid the flywhisk down in front of her. So. . . . Ursula ran her hand along the aluminum trim of the table. So. You so eager to know what I am up to all of the time, you want to know what I'm fixing to do tonight?

Sure I do, of course, Telly said as she brought a large wooden stirrer out of the boil. She put the spoon on a poodle-shaped ceramic tile that sat centered between the rowed gas ranges and she brought down some spices from the cupboard.

Bear hunting.

What?

Maybe coon hunting too, if that's easier.

Sure, sure it is—but what's this about bears? Raccoons, what. . . .

. . .

Hands to her hips, Telly turned around to look at Ursula: You're making fun.

No, no I'm not.

Thanks a lot Frances.

I'm not—

You're the one ain't fit to talk to today, Frances. Telly spun back around to the stove.

Oh, come on. . . .

. . .

Seriously, I'm not kidding you.

You're going hunting? Telly turned again, but Ursula was moving around and it took her a second to locate her friend. Tonight? That's what you're doing?

Yeah.

For bears?

Uh-huh.

With what?

Well, fore you got all sore. . . . Was thinking about making some reconciliation—having that ferocious demon-slaying Lucian you got there in the pantry come with.

. . .

Joking, joking. Christ, you ain't fit to be kidded, neither. Now I feel like I got to get a laugh from you.

Cut it out. Telly cooked.

Ursula wandered over by the counter to be looking at Telly from the side, nudging with her toe: Wish I could, but not till you laugh now for real—I probably can't stop till then. Don't force it though, that's no good. Could hurt—

Get on with your story. Hunting?

Yeah, yeah right. I am going hunting.

. . .

For bear. Ursula half-twirled in place.

. . .

A bear, I mean—a particular one. And looking for raccoons too while I'm at it. You ever heard of this story about some ghost-bear? And the raccoons, they're ghosts too. It's suppose to be out west of town in those woods.

Oh. *That*. Where did you hear that hogwash?

What! Are you telling me you knew about this all the time and never bothered clueing me in? Leaving me to hear it from strangers! You *know*—or you should know anyhow, if we're all friends like you're claiming—I *love* shit like that. How could you not of told me about this ages ago? Ursula swore under her breath.

Probably cause it's utter silliness.

Local though, local silliness. I'd of thought you of anybody can appreciate that about it. I mean, it's the best kind—the kind I can investigate and adventure around. What else are you holding out on me about?

. . .

Ursula waited a full minute, but Telly didn't respond. Can't believe you never mentioned it, that's some bullshit, Ursula said. But, yeah. So that's what it is anyways, and so now I have an expedition on my hands tonight. That's what I'm up to, there you go. You know now, happy?

Really Frances, how stupid that is—you're going out tromping through the woods at night? That's how you spend most of your time then, when you're not here? Stuff like this? *Tshhk*, woods! That long belt of plane trees? That's the woods I assume you and them stories are meaning?

Stories—there's more than one? Fucking spill it!

Fucking no, thank you. They're stupid.

So? You're always telling me all *Ann Marie-this* and *Josie-does-that*—crap I couldn't give a damn about, and you're not even going to let me in on this stuff—stuff I actually want to hear you telling? Don't be such a cock-tease—*Jesus*.

You need to curse so much?

Besides the point. They're stupid you say—*so?* So what? What!

Ludicrous stories like those—kids' stuff, why would you even care? I mean, ghost stories? I'll admit—the stories, they'd do you no harm out there, but. . . .

But?

They're just so dumb.

And?

And I don't feel like telling them. Or encouraging you.

Ursula slapped the counter and walked away. She started unpacking rest of the groceries, and when she had everything out on the table, she said: If I don't get them stories out of you I'll just have to go investigating blind—that what you want? Might not know what to—

Out there in the middle of the night? You're going to go out there by yourself? You don't know what else *is* out there. Much less silly than ghost stories, out there in the middle of the night.

Heard all that already.

Huh? Telly said, turning from the stove. What'd you say?

I didn't say nothing. Ursula held out a dish of berries she had just put together, offering them to Telly. The hostess declined. Telly went back to her preparations.

It's dangerous out there, and I don't care if you try and say it's just me because I never get out, it's not that. It *is*—it is dangerous, don't matter who you are, you or me. That there's probably the reason why I never told you about it in the first place.

You mean besides you being a crab?

Besides me not liking the stories, *oui.* They're kid stuff, but they don't so much do what they're supposed to—scare kids. At least when they're told to kids like you, anyhow. Too old for their own good, your age, but not enough so that you all would have some sense. I probably didn't tell you about it before because of just that—I knew you'd want to do some stupid thing like this. Out in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night—promise me you won't go Frances? Promise. . . .

I'm not going by myself.

Really. Who's it you got whose dumb enough to—

You want to come?

Frances. Telly turned about to face her again and then turned back instantly to attend to the stovetop.

Yeah?

. . .

Tell me the other ones. The stories, Ursula said.

No.

. . .

. . .

Jay—it's Jay who's coming along too.

Telly started, exclaimed: Ha! Now *that* is funny—no claws, huh? Well, from your talking him up, I'm sure this Jay of yours, that he's—

You've never asked about him?

—he's, that he's—

And he ain't mine now, don't start with all that. And tell me—

—he's got to have—

Hey!

. . .

You set your telephone spy-eyes out there—tell me you haven't? Ursula said.

. . .

That's what I thought, you—

Okay, so I did. So what? Telly sputtered.

So I want to know what you got. And don't go trying to pretend you don't know stuff about him when you do. *My talking him up?* Like you haven't been looking into it on your own—*sheez*.

Telly breathed deeply to control her air, to control her words: There's nothing. . . . He's son of Sylvia and that guy in the Marines that no one's ever seen but are assured he exists by

Sylvia's parents. In Eurasia, or something like that. But you must of known that your own self—didn't tell me that though, did you?

. . .

That's what I thought. Going off what you tell I wouldn't know anything now, would I? Well. But the boy, Jay. There's nothing—and you know how I feel about that.

Yeah—sore, like always when there ain't someone else's drama to cheer you.

Telly turned Ursula's comment aside: Difficult to understand or trust someone much past the age of walking and talking that there ain't no story of.

People aren't just here for your amusement, you know? And you know stuff about him, it's not nothing. Ursula dropped a couple bad strawberries into the sink and walked back to the table.

Stuff's no story, Telly said. And somewhere as small as here? No pranks, no, no. . . . Well, *you know*. Everyone's-got-one kind of thing. But he don't. How do you know how they'll act? *Re*-act? That's what I'm saying—someone without one single one story about them? With a story you get reaction, how they do about it during, afterwards. . . . But with nothing, besides being suspicious as blankness is—well, you just don't know.

. . .

So, Telly continued. You're going hunting?

Yep.

Well. Even from the little I know of this kid—which is basically all what I heard from you, no matter what you think about it, cause there just ain't nothing out there as I was just saying—but from the little that I do know anyway, I'm guessing he has more sense than to go out there in the middle of the night chasing some local spook story—*in the woods*, so called. Just chasing after some other local sprite, that's what he's doing. And I don't know if you're just out and out making fun of me, or if you're getting at it in a roundabout way, or thinking I'm stupid, or what—but I get it. God Frances, you had me worried there for a minute. *The woods!* If you really want to tell me about such things, which would be *so* nice, just knowing what you're actually doing out there—if you want to tell me I'd love you to—why don't you just come out and say it rather than going on to such lengths, making fun of me, worrying a body about your wellbeing when you're just being a snot and could just as easily say: *Jay and me are going to make it in the park or behind a dumpster a' back of the grocery or something*. . . . If you were just to say that Franny, at least then I could give you some practical advice and not be so freaked about you doing different dumb stuff while you play with me by saying fool things like *the woods* and suchlike, wanting to scare me with it, or—or I don't know what.

Good God, Ursula mumbled through a mouthful of going-soft boysenberries. She inched the bowl in the center of the table toward her friend and Telly moved over and reached out for a berry. Swallowing and then clearing her throat, Ursula continued more audibly: You think I think that much about it? Or think you're such a prude that it'd offend you? Very mothery of you, so much so that I can hardly believe that's what it is. . . . I'm serious though, not making fun of you, not shielding my doings from you for once—and here you go and get all dirty-minded on me!

Pah.

But I was for real, Ursula said. I'm going, looking for that bear—that I never even heard of before today, thanks a lot.

Telly slowly lowered her large self down into a chair opposite Ursula, and with no little difficulty. The food was set to be on its own for a bit. Telly wiped sweat across her chin and Luc

started yipping in the pantry closet. She began to stir with aims of comforting him, but Ursula stopped her with an outstretched hand.

I think he'll cope for a bit, less you want me to make myself scarce? Telly settled back against the mauve and grenadine striped upholstery of her chair and began fanning herself with the flyswatter Ursula had discarded on the tabletop. Will you stop that, it's disgusting, Ursula said. And then, in a subdued tone: Stop please?

Telly did as asked and handed the fly switch back to Ursula. Go and hang it by the sink then if you're not going to use it, Telly said. Ursula did so, and grabbed a washrag that was hanging on the sink faucet. She wiped the table off while Telly talked on: If what you're saying's the truth, well. . . . How is me not liking you going out to fool around in the middle of nowhere at night me being a prude?

Fright's prudish.

After a moment of reflection, Telly asked for some water. She took the rag from Ursula to work a particularly stubborn spot of God-knows-what on the table. Ursula got them both tea cups and ran the tap. Who told you about this anyway? Telly said.

On my way over here, this guy, he told me all about it. In a pretty round-about way—he was, I don't know, true flaky or something.

Who's that told you? Telly asked again. Even never getting out, you know how I do with my phones and all, I still know all the weirdoes in the area hereabouts. Who?

Oh, uh. . . . I'm dumb with names, Ursula said. He ended up giving me a lift. I got his card here somewhere.

He has a card? Telly said as Ursula searched her pocket.

Yeah, he had a card. She searched. Ah, I must of thrown it down with the notebook and crap at Montgomery's.

Montgomery's who? Telly said.

Oh, you know. That little shit-faced lizard son of Beatrice and her man. That Montgomery.

What were you up to over there? A classic Telly move, latching on to any and all social information Ursula (or anyone) let drop within earshot.

Nothing, nevermind. This guy who told me about the bear? I can't find the card. Norman Something-or-other. No, no—Raymond. That's his name. Knew it was some kind of *moaah*-ending thing. Raymond. Lives at the museum?

Ha! Motchpail? *Gloria?*

Uh. . . .

Bald? Little older than me?

Yeah.

Well, that ludicrous old bird—yeah, I know *him*. Museum, he said? Telly chortling, flush with recognition. She flung the washrag back over toward the sink-counter area and mopped at her brow with the chest of her dress, exposing her stomach for a moment while she lifted the cloth to her face. She wore a bright floral print that ballooned about her torso and touched the top of the gray terrycloth capris underneath. Feeling her belly exposed, she was quick to lower the fabric from her damp face.

Made a big deal out of me not knowing him, Ursula replied.

What'd he tell you exactly?

Mostly it was ridiculous, of course.

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Yes, that would be him alright. Telly spoke this slowly at first, haltingly, and then gaining in speed with her agitation: And not that I'd want to hear all what he said, as I am sure that was a lot. Nosey little bugger. And that ain't no museum neither. The place don't have more than a handful of photocopied solider letters from the war with the North and a bunch of replica memorabilia junk sitting in some fake salon-parlor that anyone can get their hands on at those disgusting flea market trade shows, or mail order. Museum? Just trying to make themselves big, is all that is. It's not like they get any public monies for that pathetic show and tell. At least I hope to God they don't. Be damned if they do—cruel gossip like that I could stand to never hear. Would have to get around here and figure out how to do some petitioning vote against those bourgeois municipal hacks.

Guess it would have to be a mail-in vote, huh?

Telly failed to note Ursula's interjection. She just kept going, railing against the museum without saying why it was exactly that she was so opposed to it, beyond its basic material poverty. She called Raymond a braggart, a swindler, and most definitely a hag hustler. With Telly getting all aggrieved and unsettled, the end of her rant unforeseen, Ursula let out a long, faintly sarcastic sounding yawn.

The stories on *him* when he was younger! Telly carried on: Probably why he started up being such a clucking hen in the first place—liked to hear about himself, and there was plenty to hear. . . .

After more comments such as the above, Ursula broke in, only to be interrupted in turn: So I assume you all were tight then, liking to yap like you do about every—

No, no—*never*, Telly gasped. We never been friendly—that man, he sure does love to shoot it with anyone, and usually the shittier it is the better it is for him. And everything's a spook story with that one—fantastic netherworlding nonsense, no matter how mundane the bull is. Star charts and suchlike, power crystals and signs in people's drinks. I'm not saying I don't like a good rumor, I see the way you're looking at me—no. It ain't that why we never got on. It's just that he goes too far with it, and then—then you don't know what you got. Opposite of your boy Jay there, but it amounts to the same difference.

What? He's—

I'm just saying you don't know what's what with them, Telly said. Always going so far out with it, Motchpail and his fabricatings—what good are they? Sustained manias of that one's type, they just become mundane, being as they's so even, you know? He probably believes in that damn bear out there, he's such a flake. If everything's all just up-up, so high pitched—well, it don't work that way. Some good stories ascend, but it's the boring stuff sets it up. So you kind of need both, you see? But he—he's all sensation and exhausting every little thing. And I'll tell you, though it's obvious and everyone knows it—well, there just ain't that much sensationalness around here! No. Not enough for him, certainly. . . .

He don't pace his gossip right, that's what you're saying?

Well, that too. His *is* lies. I'm surprised he even went with something so worn out on you, talking about the ghosts of bears! Everyone knows that stupid story like it was the one about Jesus' ghost—he must of delighted to get to tell it again, huh?

I didn't know it.

Probably couldn't believe his luck, as some crazies will even back him up on that one if you was to ask around, unlike most everything else he comes up with. And even then, no doubt he blew it all out of reality, even for that—probably where all the nonsense got so nutty in the first place, *him*. . . . And now they's ghosts!

They? What? There were just bears before?

That's the kind of crazy bullshitting power he's got somehow, even though now most no one listens to anything he says. Somehow—it's like it gets in the water. When he says it, it's bunk. But then some other idiot goes and repeats some of some other part of it and it infiltrates folks. Someone killed the only bear we ever seen around here. Then, in his hands mind you—then it turns into all *this*. So full of it! He's probably even got something on your boy Jay, cause even if he don't—why, he'll just whip something up. He's a malicious blowhard, that one is, and a bit of a he-witch too. He probably even has been talking up something or other about me, I wouldn't—

Probably a ghost story too, Ursula said under her breath.

Huh? What's a ghost story?

Ursula started to reply but stopped before she said anything intelligible.

What? Telly said.

Oh, if he or anybody else had been bothering to talk about you.

He's been talking about *me?*

That's you saying it, Ursula said as she got up and shuffled around disinterestedly. She looked into a covered pot, letting all the steam escape.

Keep out of that, I know when it'll be ready, Telly said, making shooing motions at Ursula from her seat. Really though, have they been talking about me?

I don't think you listened to what I said, Ursula answered. She crouched down beside the stove and watched the shadows of the dog's legs move around and interrupt the strip of light that showed beneath the pantry door. And they *who?*

You know who. . . . Raymond ain't the only one is out there letting his words run over into business that isn't his, Telly said.

Ursula let go an exaggerated moan. What do you care what *they* say anyway? If they was saying anything that is, which I didn't say they were. I was just teasing you, and you go and get all worked up into a fit. Don't even understand—

Are they saying stuff, or ain't they?

See? This is why I don't have to make up elaborate stories if I was wanting to make fun of you. You make it too damned easy in the first place. There's no need to bother.

Well?

Well what? Ursula said.

Are they?

Ursula rose slowly, facing the pantry door and taking a resigned breath. Telly had twisted around in her chair to look at Ursula's back and await a response, but neither said anything for a moment, nor did Ursula turn. Eyes still down on the small band of light playing across the linoleum, she remained silent until the dog made a noise. Then she looked away, watched her left hand touch the side of the oven. No Telly, no. They're not. They're. . . . Since I didn't know Raymond till this afternoon, maybe it might be I don't *know who*—don't know what you're talking about. . . . Maybe might be that no one does? Cuz *they* don't exist? They. Hardly anyone knows you're even around anymore, cooped up in here as you are, and not seeing anyone and all. *They* probably think I did you in as soon as we met and now I'm just holding up this charade of you in here so I can run your credit out—talking to people on the phone and holding my nose, pretending it's you cuz I'm so smart, looking for me every few other days to throw them off. . . .

That's what they're saying?

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

No! No. They ain't saying a thing! Not anything—nothing, nothing. Ah, your sense of conversing is slipping too.

Too? *Too?* I know what that means. . . .

Oh, come on. It—it don't mean anything. I didn't even mean to—

And why do you have to call me *that?*

That what?

You know. . . .

No, really. What.

Forget it. You don't usually. Forget it.

You trying to drive me out of here or something? Ursula was getting genuinely worked up now. And though throughout their conversation Telly's tone had been bordering on histrionic, in spite of appearance, she wasn't upset. But now Ursula was. Telly was just theatrical and quarrelsome by nature, and with her receiving such infrequent interaction with others (especially in the flesh), she could not help but start silly little spats with Ursula. To excite herself, if only. And sometimes the dog would join in and bark along with their bickering too. Usually they did not get very far into it, as Ursula knew how it was with her friend, but this particular evening Ursula'd had more than her share already. To excite herself, Telly—but also to store it up. She hoarded these interactions and replayed them in her head, to review, to prepare for the next time—this is what she did with herself when she was alone so much: she prepped dialogues to employ at the next meeting, dialogues which would never pan out, of course. Her conversation was devised as she'd sit and try to gain French through the television—and just as stilted as that, inflexible, yoked with a vocabulary of subtitles and so not real, never conversations that will occur. There was no room for deviation, no allowance for an *other*. In spite of this, her ideations definitely passed time, and so went on. In reality, unrealized.

As such, any small sticking point then in the conversation between them became a suck of quicksand, pulling them down into it, and pulling down all the quicker with any thrashing, flailing. Attempting gestures and statements like those she nursed in her head while awaiting Ursula—Ursula, her good-true friend-for-life, the friend of these internal dialogues (real life being more questionable concerning these last few assertions), Ursula, who appeared every three-four days with food, supplies—these script moves, the motions and words Telly plotted out, when they did finally see the light of real interaction they failed, and in their failure they produced a conversational tone of: Flailing, Thrashing. The arguing they were engaged in this evening was not exactly the traditional quarrel—Telly being unable to anticipate so much outside material coming to her from her friend, who was usually less forthcoming—but all the same, it sounded a very similar note. And this arguing, it would be very rich for her plotting on all she had heard, preparing for the next time. The visit to come.

The week previous Telly had actually put some version of this forth—that she had a plan for what they were to talk about always, and that Ursula ruined it. . . . What Ursula had done then was to pretend she hadn't heard this and to skip out of supper. After they ate they usually just sat around and watched television or Ursula left.

Dramatic, following a measured pause, Telly put forth her complaint: Telly. You called me Telly.

Ursula, beside herself, laughed good-naturedly. *Zoé*, then. . . . We're friends, right, like you said? This is a form of friendship, yeah? And I *haven't* killed you or ridden your credit out yet. . . . Be grateful. I'm just teasing—you just lighten up, okay? And that is about to boil over, but I won't interfere, Madame Z.

Huffing, Telly extracted herself from her seat and went over to the stovetop as the bubbling eruption ran over, whooshing at the touch of the blue circle of gaslight beneath the cast iron pot. They both remained quiet, Telly cleaning up, attending to the progress of the meal, Ursula peeling the canvas lo-tops from her feet and making sweaty footprints and single-toed impressions in the grime on the floor. She slid her feet around so that little beads of liquefied scuzz clung to the outer edges of her calluses. Looking at her scratched-up legs, she said: Telly. That *is* your name.

And Frances Miner is yours, so what? I don't like it, and you know it.

Sorry.

It's . . . it's okay.

. . .

. . .

I just won't call you anything then. I usually don't.

I know, Telly said.

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The newly arrived night air lowered over Battawa and offered a second start to the roving day. She turned around. Missed sunset, and now the shoes—Mrs. Robin's heels still on the porch back there. Already four blocks down the street, she turned again and went on in the direction of town. Shoes could be recovered later, after the hunt. Telly was left behind, unwilling to budge. Absented, set to be clad in Ursula's fancy: to be someone else altogether, opened out into the world again. Houselights ticked on, blue-green and yellow beams casting through the lanes and yards.

Acquitted of grocery duties for the next few days and with the evening begun, Ursula was free of her friend, and the idea of Telly and Telly's ways passed through nightfall, through the adjustments of Ursula's eyes in the charged light. A daydream, a friend-become-immaterial. Ursula said her name aloud—the only thing reality and her concepts shared. Telly of real, Telly who lived back there in that house, Telly who willfully incarcerated herself at home and sent Ursula to engage the life of the world for her. . . .

A tricycle had been left at the curb and a rope swing curled and uncurled itself. Firecracker vines climbed fences that bound the street. Hidden birds called out, sounding almost mechanical in their recitations. The air scented with vine blooms, clinging thick in its humidity. Movement in the trees. And then rows of houses without lights. Ursula moved through the swollen air—inward, unlit, revisiting a past she had made up for the inner creation that was the Telly of her design.

. . . she is born beautiful and loudly and then she goes to sleep. Telly. The first thing she remembers is leaves sweeping in a door pulled by the wind up around her on tile when she is two. Has a brother and then loses him and is beautiful and then not so loud when she is three. At four she forgets how to talk and becomes blinded. One day her grandmother takes her to see a musical. To hear it, that is. She had remembered how to talk two weeks later when she was four. When her grandmother took her to the musical she was nine. After the intermission was over and the reel came back up pushing light on the screen then, when it opened up like a tunnel or something, then Telly could actually see the actors dancing and singing in front of her rather than just hearing their joy. Six weeks to the day after she was seeing again, Telly went deaf. Life

changed difficulties and kept going. Everyone was upset again but she wasn't that upset again. When she was sixteen and helping a cousin clean out roof gutters she started yelping and weeping when she heard faraway crashing ocean waves. The waves got close and louder over the days and weeks and months and they turned into bird chirps and car horns and frying bacon and alarms and footsteps and kids crying and just about everything else that anyone will ever hear. When she was seventeen and a half then she was the most sensitive person one would ever be likely to meet. Something always waking and erupting in her and such gigantic changes of her body and all and she understood things. . . . After being blind went away and when she still could not hear anything she became little and pretty and then after she could hear again she was married to a rich young foreign business guy who had just moved to her town. On her nineteenth birthday a few months after they wed her husband lost all his money in dealing with Texan housing contractors and then he wrote her a complicated and crazy love note before accidentally dying in their swimming pool. Their swimming pool was shaped like some angel. He died after swallowing a bunch of marbles. It was really a love note and not the other kind, though everyone else did not believe it except for Telly. He swallowed a marble every time he got especially nervous and upset. He had been doing this forever but no one had even known about his habit before the autopsy. He had not drowned though and this was how they found the marbles. And even then no one besides Telly thought that this strange eating had not been a one-time thing. They guessed he had ate them all at once insanely on purpose to die. But that was not true Telly knew. All those balls with frozen flowers and rivers in their bellies were swallowed by habit time and again and again through the last twenty-odd years of his living. And when he was upset about the bad business with the Texans he was eating marbles all the time every hour every fifteen minutes. And he was so used to doing it when he was so nervous that it just happened. As then he was more bothered than he ever was before and he probably did not even think when he did it. In a chest she found in his office Telly found more marbles in a special container. Enough when they were added with the ones that were in him to be one for every day of the year. Two hundred and some in the office and all of them had taken turns going through his body. Either thirty-six or thirty-seven times each. Why? Well. Accidentalness. Habit. Caretaking. Her general sensitivity now had this whole mess of a thing joined up with all her physical sense stuff, and it opened up new and different and she kept the collection of marbles with her then. And through them she began to see things too. Sensitive and impressionable and compassionate and filled with body toughness that had built its strength in the years of her handicaps. Telly kept some of the marbles in a clear crystal globe. And she would change which ones were in there every so often. And with them as her conduit she communed with the dead. . . .

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BATTAWA MUSEU was painted in a sickly gray on woodblock letters hung from the eaves. There was no sign of the missing *M* anywhere and an *A* and the *E* appeared ready to depart as well. The building was huge, skirted on three sides by a wooden veranda. Suspended from a corner joist, a set of stone chimes spun and swayed. Ursula pitched a pebble up at the suspended instrument, stirring a burst of sound.

A garden ornament out in the yard held a lamp trained over a ragged patch of purple milkweed. Following the veranda up around the side of the building, the light weakened, and as she approached the stairs she started back, stumbling. She only really saw them when one

moved—two upright and grossly asymmetrical forms stood there in the half-light before her up on the porch. *God!* she shouted without meaning to. You scared me!

Motchpail?

What?

You Motchpail?

Oh, no. Sorry I'm, I just. . . .

You ain't Motchpail?

No.

Son a bitch. You know where I could find him?

No. Her breathing began to slow down as she stared up at the figures on the porch. I, uh—I was just coming here to drop something off, she said.

The man lurched forward from the shadows of the veranda to sit on the top stair step. It was only then that she could get a sense of what she had first seen, part of the strangeness that had scared her—it had been his turned back. His front side was no less ill-arranged however, and she had a hard time looking or not looking at him. His eyes she couldn't see, but his eyebrows were thick and conjoined and the sockets of his eyes were unbalanced, as if his cheekbones had different purposes from one to the other, his face a lopsided slope—higher to the right, his nose upturned and pushed left. The face slimmed to that side, his left. The skin pulled up tightly against the jawbone there, while the right half was swollen out, loose looking. He was unshaven, and his ragged beard was broken by patches of exposed and mottled flesh, most so approaching his raw lips. His body held mass where it should not have in the shoulders and on his right side, especially at the neck. As he settled, wrenched there, crooked to one side and tilting, he spoke, his jaw concealing his teeth and blurring his words: Yeah. Me too. He motioned back up at the other shape on the porch with a movement of his head that looked painful.

She strained her eyes up at the object. There were large swathes of dark paper wrapped around its irregular sides, bound with lengths of twine rope and string. What is it?

Package.

Yeah, but—you know what's in it?

. . .

Is it for the museum?

This the museum?

Yeah.

It's for the museum then. Motchpail supposed to sign for it.

Raymond? Huh. Thought he'd be here. That's why I came here, to tell him something, she said. The light that lit around the porch edge flickered and died. There was a silence between them and then the man coughed. With a ticking that became a hum, the light revived itself.

I knock and ring the bell. Been here a hour before dark. Ain't seen nobody.

Why don't you leave if he ain't around?

I need signed.

So you're just going to wait?

I need signed.

She looked around, down the street and at the drive. Raymond's truck wasn't there or anywhere else. She turned back to the steps. How'd you get it here? she asked.

Myself.

No, I mean, how—what did you use? How did you—

With myself.

You carried it?
Yeah.
You carried it? It's taller than you.
I know.
It's heavy?
. . .
Didn't you feel, uh, what you think it might be, or—
It's heavy but it's not too heavy.
But you don't know what. . . .
No. Why would I?
Aren't you, well. . . . Don't you want to know what it is?
I just need sign.
She looked back up at it again. You have no idea?
. . .
Can I look?
He sat still and said nothing.
I could sign. Maybe it's for me.
You ain't no museum.

No, but you said you didn't know who it's for—if it's for the museum or not. And I could sign and then you could go. It's here where you was suppose to bring it, yeah? I'd sign and then you can go. I can sign.

He was staring down the road and had been for a while. I need paid too.

Oh. Nothing more was said and she shifted a little in place and looked up at the package and him, he sitting there in the middle of the stairs blocking her path up to the door, watching the street. She stayed quiet and went sorting in her pocket for what she'd come here to give to Raymond.

After she had been looking for a few seconds, he asked: How much you got?

I, I don't have anything. I was just going to drop this thing off and go. I have to go. She pulled the sheet of wax paper out of her pocket. Uh, you got a pen?

Yeah, he said, jerking his head in the direction of the porch. Up on that.

She came up the stairs. He didn't move to get out of her way, and when she got closer she could see that he had longish matted hair and was visibly dirty, a crest of pustules coming around his right ear and up to his eye. And she saw his eyes, still directed down the street at town. He didn't stir at all and when she walked up they were so close as to where she would have usually excused herself passing by, but with him staring off as he was and his eyes—she almost started back again, seeing his look, unprepared for it just as when she had first seen him in the shadows of the porch—with his eyes low and turned away she just got by and went up quick toward the door behind his back.

When she reached the package she stopped. She put her hand out on the brown paper. Held her palm there a moment and more and then moved it down over a jut in the side of the packing. Turned to see him sitting there, unmoved. She hopped up on her toes and grabbed the pen off the top of the package. Keeping watch, she unfolded the sheet she had swiped from the Franklins' butcher. She wrote with the wax paper in her hand and the pen working against her palm underneath, almost tearing the paper as much as inking it. The sheet held a tracing she had made in the dining hall, a copy of the nude photograph she'd got at the Robins'. She put her name and an address on the picture and then she slipped it beneath the front door. And the yard

light died out once again and came back. The knocking of one stone chime against another resounded out into the night, and she was gone.

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Away in the night a pickup truck peeled out, its horn bleating an obscene, sustained warning. Ursula turned to watch its high beams strobe past buildings and trees—her form pitched, expanding to a distorted giantess against a garage door for a second in the sweeping light. Three crouched figures were corralled in the truck bed and carried away into the dark horizon, howling. Through the drapes and screen doors of the neighborhood houses, televisions flickered and roared laugh track out into the street. In an herb garden there was a large lamp-bearing statue identical to the one outside the museum and there was someone real laughing from inside the house behind it. As she looked back at the windows where the laughter came from, a low-hanging tree branch hit in her in the side of the face. There was already a light dew on and she wiped her cheek dry with the shoulder of her dress. She pulled a few leaves off the branch she had walked into and stood there mashing them dispassionately between her palms.

Up the block a little way she paused again and doubled back and ducked into a grass drive beside a condemned house. The building was falling in on itself, the back half of it missing a wall, a cutaway shoebox diorama: an overturned toilet sat by a refrigerator, gourds twisted and bacterial-florescent with age lined the floorboards, stacks of books and mason jars covered an electric stove. Dark plastic sheeting partitioned this section off from other rooms. She watched the house as she walked into the property. Toward the end of the lane she found an old Charger before a stand of balsam. She went around the far end of the car and pulled up the hem of her dress and squatted and urinated.

The roof of the car had collapsed and mold had taken over the doors and upholstery, a collection of leaves settled within with assorted bottles and discarded clothing. The car had stars and bars on its plates and the tires slashed. As she walked back to the street smoothing her dress down her sides a dark figure ran toward her—then was restrained and felled. The chow was silent as it got back to its feet and again tensed the rope which held it strung to an upright on the porch of the deserted building. The dog pushed its black-violet tongue out and kept pulling against its leash, panting grotesquely, its eyes reflecting the night. The property remained dark and the animal silent. There was no collar on it, just the cord bound around its neck. The animal would retreat, step forward and back, relaxing the rope and working against it. She was well up the street at the Batt-Ice Parlor when the dog started barking.

Closed and long abandoned, the roadside sweets stand was in the shape of an ice cream cone. Twirling to a looped peak, the roof was made to look vanilla—paint and pieces of it now gone, the insides exposed to the sky. At ceiling height, the outside of the shack had a ridge with the letters c u p h a p p y c u p h a p p y c u p circling it. The order menu was busted out and shards of the plastic shield and numbers and letters lay in the drive. Ursula picked up some of each. Circular picnic tables flanked the order window and were chained there into a patio that had been poured in the shape of a snowman. Umbrellas stripped of fabric stood fastened through the middle of the blue plastic tables, and the exposed ribs had wept rust onto the concrete below.

Under a cedar whose limbs crested above the building, playground equipment. Polar bear statues on the prowl, poorly crafted graffiti and scraped-in initials set into their sides. A plastic tube for climbing through, ending in the openness of a cherry-red pair of lips and blanched teeth

that had been glossed onto fiberboard. Pogo riders of cartoon mice, ducks, skunks, with thick, squat, corroded springs. A world-go-round, collapsed to one side of its axis. Monkey bars. On the shutters of the order window there was a FOR RENT sign, its markered-in telephone numbers marked out. Having missed its initial opportunity, the distant chow kept on with its noise after the fact, baying as it did, continually—the sound of it sounding like the bark of a seal. Ursula skipped a rock across the parking lot pavement and went.

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A hoard of termites floated about, awkward and imprecise in flight, temporary wings prematurely lost and flaking from their bodies as they brushed against the building in efforts to land. Back behind the store Jay stood staring up at the lights that attracted the bugs, hands at his sides. Stationed there and spotlighted by the loading dock as he was, Ursula could see him from a long way coming.

We should teepee Telly, she said while still far off in the field.

When she got closer, without lowering his gaze, Jay said: They just locked up. Otherwise we could go in and snag some tissue right now.

Sidling up to him, Ursula cocked her head and looked at bugs too. In a lowered voice, she said: Don't you have some sneak's way in? Getting no response, she elbowed him mischievously: Hey? Hey, don't you—

Jay dodged the next elbow, and shook his head by way of reply. He still hadn't looked at her. You'd have to be the one to clean it up anyways, he said.

Ursula tucked her foot around his ankle and dragged his leg out, making him turn. He reset his footing and looked at her. Even if I'll be the one cleaning it, she said. We should. It'll be fun.

Given up on your ghost already then?

No, no—definitely not. There's time for both. You work tomorrow?

Tomorrow night.

See. No problem, we got time for both.

He looked back up at the lights. Where we going to get the paper?

Can't we get in?

No, that's why I always ask if you want anything before you go. Because I have to get stuff before I leave, but you said you didn't want anything.

Yeah, just I didn't really think of this till right now. So now how are we going to get a bunch of toilet paper?

I don't know. We don't, I guess.

Well, crap.

Jay stepped away and went to his backpack that lay propped against the building. Consolation, he said, offering Ursula a green bottle, its top wrapped in gold foil.

What's this? Bubbly!

I think it's technically sparkling wine. We just got them in today, I took two.

Ursula yelped a little when she opened the first bottle. She made a great mess of it, shooting the cork off the store wall and spraying the pale straw-colored wine on both of them.

We really going to go out there? Jay asked when she was through. I mean, go out and try and see this bear thing?

After slurping at the mouth of the bottle, Ursula stated: We are. She put her hand on the back of Jay's neck, leaned him forward and kissed the top of his head, leaving his short red hair pressed with traces of wine. When he looked up she gave him a quicker kiss on the cheek. Blooming. Ursula stood up on her toes to study Jay's hair. I think yours turned out better than mine even though I used most of the bottle. Yours isn't even all the way dyed and its better. Way better.

Mine is mostly red in the first place, that's probably why. Yours looks fine, what are you talking about?

Nevermind.

You're just not used to it.

Ah, I don't have to see it as much as everybody else, so why bother about it. Fine. Nevermind. You want your shoes back?

No, it's okay. You just wear them.

Okay. Ursula tousled his hair and said how she liked it. Jay stuttered something and cleared his throat. What is it with you all and spitting all the time, she said. Do you *live* outdoors or something?

You don't even wear shoes, mostly.

Is probably why I don't like there to be spit laying around everywhere.

Hm.

Jay spits when he is nervous, or excited, or angry, or maybe just outside, Ursula ventured. He was some combination of these things, most likely, she said. And Ursula, she was thrilled—*thrilled* that she was actually seemingly on the cusp of a bear hunt, an honest to the Lord ghost-tracking, and she babbled on about it at length. She changed course eventually, after a quarter mile or so. She began enumerating some of the small, none-too-becoming revenges she'd enacted upon Telly of late: Though that's hardly all of them! She laughed. Smiled and grabbed Jay's hand. He handed back the bottle of champagne that was in his other hand. Ursula smirked and pushed it back him—moved in quick and kissed him on the mouth.

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They went. Down Baywood to Inman. Down the cul-de-sac and to the footbridge over the highway, then down Hill Street, walking in the middle of the road because they could. Past all the black cottage churches and on to Riverside. Past the railroad trellis by the bottom, little valleyed shoals and damp creek loam. Broken furniture and bottles between the bridge supports. To the junkyard past the bridge, and the red cabs and cop car under the overpass alongside the river. Warehouses, the closed hatchery. Turning to cross the river back to Baywood. Past the abandoned west market barns and the semis and animal trailers and the old livestock café with its newspaper pullout American flag in the window, faded hours painted out front *5am-2pm Home Cooking*. Crushing some crabgrass spikes and seedpods underfoot and Baywood disappeared doglegging to become Haven and then Farns Hill. Up off the river with the ramp supports wrapped in kudzu, shading everything and them from the bridge lights. And up.

At the foot of a billboard, two silhouettes cut across the advertisement, shadows falling down before them on the slope below. They sat on the metal shelf in front, Ursula sprawled out and Jay nearby with left leg crossed over right, leaning back on his hands. Ursula fixed herself

on her elbow and they passed the bottle and what little remained in it, speaking a bit about their days. Jay asking after Telly, who he'd never met. Ursula inquiring about the shift at the store.

There's no way he drinks that much himself!

Well, that's how much he buys every day.

After such talk was exhausted the conversation idled and Ursula started pitching things out into the surrounding field, lightening her dress pocket. What seemed to be a small claw. Pebbles. A button. Two date pits. Fragments of a gaudy white natica shell. Gum wrappers. A ball of rolled together leaves. . . . She lit matches one by one out of a book and sent them dying in the air before they could hit the ground and grow.

The abundant artificial light and the low cling of the sky kept most of the stars from their sight. They argued about a low point on the horizon, as to whether it might be one or not. Ursula insisted that it was blinking and red and moving, a plane. Jay said no, it wasn't blinking *or* red. It was a planet, he said. They bickered on for a while and Ursula swore it was blinking and alternately reddened, but eventually she conceded that it was not a plane because by then it was clear it was not moving. At least not right here.

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You're the most beautiful example of humanity I know of.
Beauty is to humanity as we are to God.

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. . . some of the workers' boys found it. Tucked back under the rock stairs, the pit where they lay in numbers that couldn't be counted for all of them that were in it. And the boys found and then stacked fences and driftwood on top of its mouth so that there was no way out. And so it became a trap. When we saw them coming from the camp with all those rats they'd gathered up over a few days, we yelled at them and had to know what it was for. They had the rats still alive in burlap bags inside fruit crates. The boys were so happy about it, and wanting us to know, and they laughed and brought us along with. The sea looked small somehow under the sun that day, as it does sometimes. And the rats and maybe mice were making horrible high noises all blinded and bunched together in the cloth. It jumped around like a dirty ghost you could see. They didn't tell us what it was about at first. But they showed us the boards and fence parts laid out there under the stairs and laughed a lot about the rats because they said we were afraid of them. Then they poured the boxes of pellets into the bags and the rats fought over them. The pellets were poison. They put them burlaps back in the crates and waited for the poison to be ate. A little sweet looking boy who sat on one of the crate's lids above all the commotion in it said this was stupid and that they should just use gasoline. The older kids told him he didn't know what he was talking about and they didn't want to ruin them and their skins so we'll just try this first. We wanted to know how they got all so many rats together, but since they'd just come from the camp area we didn't ask. Tired of waiting around, the boys decided to put rocks on the crates and go swim and then come back and see if the pellets were gone. They dumped more pellets into the

bags and then they went around the cliff to strip and swim and left us behind. We didn't follow them either as we usually would because the beach past the cliff stairs that way had so many small rocks and stones on it and when a few of those little boys got undressed together and flouncing around they liked to throw them at us if we were there. We wanted to see what they were up to with the rats and all though, so we walked back along and played a few games that we always played at the stairs there, because we could still see them then when they would come back up the beach this way. But since we didn't actually want to be playing those games then and were just doing it to pass time we stopped and just sat around and talked. Dared each other to write love notes to the orchard workers and then to eat some of the pellets. Once and awhile some of us would go spy around the corner to make sure the boys hadn't run off and weren't just making fun of us letting us sit there like that and the whole thing just a joke. But they were always out in the water when we'd look, messing around. A few spies got rocks thrown at them and then they all came back. By the time the boys were done the mice and things were moving around strange. And with all their fighting there were some there that weren't moving, and blood. The boys carried the crates over and cleared off the fences and wood from the pit. They poured out the bags down into it. They wanted to wait and see what happened, but it was already pretty dark and their parents had already been around looking for them. Down in the hole all we could see was the earth moved around. So we had to come back the next day to see. We got up early to make sure they didn't leave us or go without us. They had morning chores and weren't ready forever. They brought along a few of their sisters to show too. First thing they made sure we hadn't told a soul and then got the same promises out of their younger siblings and made them say they wouldn't tell in the future neither. They made threats that couldn't really work on us if they thought about it, but then they wanted everyone in the same boat so we said yes to that too. To whatever they said about it, we said yes. When they uncovered the pit this time their sisters screamed and we could see better but still nothing much had changed. The mice or rats scrambled and rose among the writhing and the boys got upset at there being no difference from last night even though they hadn't counted the mice before they threw them in and so weren't sure that nothing had happened. One of them said that the poison box said twelve hours at least and it was still wait and see. The rats were definitely mostly acting sick though they were still moving so there was still hope. We didn't have anything to do and even though it was horrible looking we could have just sat there and watched forever all day. The boys though had stuff they were suppose to be doing back at home at the camp and they couldn't wait around like us so they blocked the pit back up and started home reminding everyone of their threats and telling their sisters and the littler boys to shut up. And us too if we said anything, cuz they were sour from nothing happening yet. We went back home too and laid in bed and didn't sleep and waited for closer to night when it would be more normal for us to be out so we wouldn't have to lie because no one would ask us what we were doing out there. Because we were always out in the night, but when it came the workers' kids weren't allowed out. Or the next day, they had them doing all kinds of things and it was a saint day too, a big one. So then the day after that. And we waited until near nightfall and finally the boys got out for a little and came and got us. Though there were still some there was much less movement and all the mice had gone. The movement that there was was slow red brown and green and gray and green in patterns and flecks of black and you still couldn't count for all of them or tell what parts belong to what, but some were motionless and we were quiet. And slow, the little motions. And mostly red. We started naming red things in our hearts—lacquer berry rose vermillion carmine ruby crimson scarlet russet venetian currant rouge burgundy poppy rust oxidized spirit ribbons red. And move with the

sounds of color. Gabriel brought along a fruit catcher and with it he poked down in among them at the ones that were still. And one stayed still, he hooked it and brought it out of the hole up to us. The boys had rocks ready in case of anything. They fetched more out of the pit and a few were just skins but some had left their bodies too and they were no longer able to sting. None of them were when they were pulled up, though they still looked awful and the boys were thrilled and some they saw later had already gotten white worms in them. Inside their eyes and beneath the skin. But the boys only really wanted their skins so it wasn't that big of a deal if they'd gotten eaten through a little. But the first one Gabriel pulled up when everyone was standing way back to watch, he threw it out away from him to see what would happen, if it moved. It didn't. And it was as long as Gabriel and half his sister end to end. And then we came up around it and it had two heads. One was like squared off stone and off of it came another one and that one had its mouth open that it could never close off the side of its body and off its other head that was closed. And so many more of them down in the pit. It was full dark by the time we were done with the first. That was the only one we kept and cured its skin ourselves and then it got hung up at the entrance of the orchard above the lower rock cut stairs and watched over us, the snake with its heads and all that of the missing garden of its stomach, all of its sense then lost through our care. It watch, *is*. Heads filled with light. Yeah.

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Laughter across the fields and highway. Into a clearing with hands bold, arms about a waist. Ursula's hands are so brave. Traffic off the low hillcrest—birds aerating, veering out silent unseen. Stones tossed down in burnt grass from out of the sun. Pollen wanting loft in the air. . . . A hollow, sown. Ursula blew the last spray of their cheap spirits into the field. It spreads, attaches and grows, grows, she sings.

Gratten and the pale bloom of blackthorn. Dust rising in sheets. Matches she lights, and pitches lights into the weeds, matchsticks candent. The grass in its irregularity, they body it down, crushed without the day, and sculpt hollow twins of them there. Shift of leverage—a string of pebbles placed in the dirt, bearing into her back. Phantic cant, champ talk in the fallen dark. Ursula bites his shoulder. In the sun the grasses will stand back up themselves. The black waves of the sky. A body, a thing throwing itself down. Suffocating in the open field. With the light stretched to even here then, out of the pitch country.

And to see where the clouds were looking up, you couldn't. And looking up and nothing there to see them by, nothing but the light on you. Brushing her dress again, settling her clothes onto herself. Through the weedcover and fields, Jay trailing. And the far distant light. Catching up, then at her side. Derelict factories cordoned Battawa to the southwest. He said something softly, to which she did not respond.

Roofless mills, trees raised through the walls and windows. In brick-patch lanes, crossing junctions ran to docks and industrial hangars, overgrown train rails swallowed into the asphalt. Metal walls reflexive and sounding the little wind. The old everything within. Wreck, remnant—mechanical skeletons and traps. Paper trash shuffling the floors. Discarded prints, socks. Mattresses and blankets and landings of spent oil. Animal tracks. Shattered bulbs and skylight through the ceilings in the dirt. At the western reaches—lanes of trees. Gesturing out toward the horizon. The lights of an open-air manufacturing yard.

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The twinned mineral silos loomed up in the teal and tulip-yellow shades of the pole lamps' luminance. Stenciled paintwork on the structures spelled out CONCRETE and depicted the company's logo—a pyramid. Sediment refuse drifted on the air and coated the landscape, making everything appear more ancient than what actually could be, caking all in ash-like trappings of dust.

Long thin aluminum slats woven into the surrounding chain-link fence blocked visibility of the yard, blinding the perimeter. The topmost sections of fencepost were slanted inward, the kind made as perches for razor wire. Without any barbs there, the denuded poles looked as if they were a series of arched arms extended up toward the fluxing sky. The fence was mounted on an incline of concrete that rose away from street level at a forty-five degree angle and up five feet to where it planated and provided a base for the works within.

The concrete foundation had developed a powdered, blank coloration on top of the pure company yellow it had originally been painted. Inside ten minutes of startup production and the first unloading of concrete meal the entire lot had altered, the wind distributing a veil of residue and cloaking the initial luster of the yard. Thereafter the ground had always retained a dull, chalk-shaded layer that could register footprints, the sliding progression of which, in this instance, described the path taken by Ursula and Jay. Tennis shoe tracks went back behind shrubbery that fronted a section of the cyclone fence. Through poor maintenance some of the metallic blinders were no longer bound in place—stripped away by storm winds or whatever other of God's causes it could be—providing the pair with a view of the insides, a partial look upon the concrete manufactory.

This was a necessary stop said Ursula, standing there, pressed up against the fence. There is a pool that wants some swimming swum inside. Most of the aluminum strips in the fence had not been wholly torn out of place and they clung as tree roots do, grown too close and finally out of the soil in an overhang of the riverbank. Or perhaps there had been fence around the blinds, but it crumbled away, swept with the current. Hovering, draped out, tracing across one another, faint chimes. . . . In a burst of wind the metal lines slapped against the fence and whipped around over their heads, crashing with the sound of thunder on the diamond-patterned wiring.

Jay looked to Ursula and asked her something that was drowned out by the wind and metal and she pushed his gaze to where she would have it, her index finger through one of the chain-links and pointing across the lot over to a series of aggregate hills saying it was over there, what she wanted to see, over there. And then she was climbing. He gave her a boost that she certainly did not seem to need, but which she accepted in silence. He turned away slightly as she passed over his head, allowed a moment for her to gain the top, and then began up the barrier himself. A length of aluminum slashed against his calf.

When he leapt down from halfway up the fence she was already well ahead and he followed in silence, looking around at the elevated control station and the unmanned front loaders and transport trucks. When he turned back to Ursula she was scaling up into one of the sand hills, slipping back against her forward progress and laughing as she stirred a great cloud that swelled, exestuating and ghostly in the overhead lighting. Grains of wind-swept debris clung where she had spilled champagne on his legs and they upset sight, forcing him to shield his face and look away. Head down and t-shirt pulled over his nose against the dust tides, he circled around the hills, eyes watering when he arrived on the far edge to see her skid off the sand mount

down onto the formed concrete. She bounced up and said simply: There. Over his shoulder he saw what she was getting at.

The pool functioned in some part of the cement processing, but neither of them knew exactly the what, how or which of it. When he asked her how she even knew about this she said it had been in the back of her mind forever, as long as she had been here, and that it could not go untouched now any longer than she could not touch it. Plus, she still had sweat and sand and alcohol all over her and of course that would give them away to the bear later, wouldn't it? And then where would they be? And so—known about forever, and now, out of curiosity and opportunity and necessity—must. This was it here, time to breach. We *must*.

Lime-hued, the water presented a semi-translucent appearance, a solidity much like that which she had imagined the ghost-animals to be composed of—or so she told him, a foggy thickness to the clear of it all.

But the bear is a ghost, right? How could it smell you?

Suprasensory.

That's not a word, he said quietly.

The pool divided into segments of rectangle, rectangles inside rectangles, all contained within a square concrete shape. They stood at the corner of the largest section, its water level inches beneath the raised edge. The corresponding parts were connected by filters and troughs, the pools growing smaller as they progressed away from where Ursula and Jay stood, the formation roughly constructed in an inward turning coil. The smaller internal pools had increasingly milky and flotsam-choked surfaces, while the water of the large pool held an even, jade-like consistency. Unlike the others, this surface was not allowed to become stilled and congested: fountainhead sprinklers mounted on the sidewalls shot rushes of water onto its fresh and shifting surface.

She should have had dreams about this place. Waking, she had thought about it an inordinate amount, but dreams she hadn't had, and she tried to tell him about this but she was saying it all wrong, she said.

You had daydreams though, right? Don't that count? Receiving no response he went on, stumbling over his words, groping for some approach she would attend to, but neither Ursula nor Frances nor anyone heard what he was saying to her: he didn't think she should go in—but she, she wasn't listening. She was taking off her clothes. With the sound of the fountain water, the churr of far-off cicada solidified into a staid blanket tone that bled on, unnoticed. Frances. . . . Frances?

Jay went around the periphery of the pool, shuffling, searching the dark. He found a waylaid fencepost and set about testing the depth of the water. It hadn't hit bottom when it slid out of his hand and then she was undressed, small and pastel in the floodlights' wake. The waters were flexing shape in-against the concrete walls and around the cross-shaped level marker at the far end of the pool. The marker seemed as if it were moving while the water surrounding, the actual body in motion, appeared its static track. And Ursula dove.

The cleaning pool had a blind shelf buried in the water. The slight arch of her dive, just at the end. The edge an arrow awaiting her. With a crease, with a pout and a burst, the one hundred-headed serpent stretched about with sovereignty—its manifold preening jaws spreading in all directions away from her, diffusing out into millions with the heavy waters—liberated, blossoming out the grooved opening in Ursula's crown.

Bodies float on fat and breath, and as exhalations slipped to the surface in bursting swells, the waters quicksand around her diminutive limbs, drawing them down into the liquid

copse. A pit, an orchard with burs. Her arms, her ribs, her hips. A field with night-flood and nettled horns—it held. Her neck. Low currents. Her rough and cane-cut legs. The chalked mineral waters around her slowed pulsing frame. And blood thickened even as it initially wept thin: perforate, bruise spreading in the water—beaten into fleshing clouds. Shock rolling with the new color, thick coalescing dark cords to gradated pink disappearing. The night sky charts the body down. Laden, pin-ups of the heavens spark down on the crests. Fowl and reptile amalgamated, Draco writhes around the golden apples that make up its side—stars mutated through the water, gnawing scales to seed-bloom. Those white flashes overlap, hypertelic, somnolent in their rounds. Descent, on toward the break with the concealed barrier above. Each of the hundred dragons' heads continue to open in fissures, one hundreds of their every own one, eventually to swallow everything in its red scale gulf—devoured by devouring.

Playing out on the floor of the mixing pool, what she had been waiting for—an envelope, her name and whereabouts typed:

Ursula Frances Miner
Battawa, Louisiana

In the envelope a cheque written out for a fortune, dated for the future. Code. (The date the day her fortune teller knew was hers to die on. Far, far away.) Ursula exited her suite platting barefoot across the lot, noticing nothing but her path. Past the kids doing chalk on the faded blacktop, past the web-laced ivies and past the potted kumquat tree into the motel office. Sheryl Lynn was in back, gasping at a soap, neglecting the front desk. She could afford to, there's a bell to ring if you want her. Ursula tiptoed in and slid over to the saltwater aquarium on the far side of the room. Arrived, she looked around suspiciously—coast clear, she dunked the cornflower blue cheque in. Its inks loosed in ribbony tentacles stretching the water. The fishes put the trails in their mouths. The invisible ink is revealed. The secret writing says:

(A statue of St. Francis
Without arms.
A circular hole in his chest.
Vines growing into and out
Of it.
Red clay-colored as always,
And the animals still love him)

Ursula, amidst it all—red and rust hair and head melding, knotted, strung and wed, her shallow bone-streamed cheeks in rivulets, in locks. Matter all about her, out of her. Unhurt, enwombed, afloat. Open and ginger-mouthed, her teeth touched with lime. Limbs extend away gentle from her body, preparing to detach if asked, and her fingers spread out of their palms, weaving and held in the water's grasp. A verdigris of green of irises cased in under their lids. Her head tilts back and away from herself, stilling, aligning as if the gash within it were axled to a specific point in the night above, the body precariously tethered to it all. The little bear and hunter, curled up together in sleep.

SUNDAY

OCTOBER 21

FOXHILL, NC

URSULA GEMMA

Nathan Smith

All signs of the passing of night to day and day to night are removed from the room. Thick curtains of fawn shade envelop the single window. Soft lamplight burns on, throwing shadows and bright, the illumination as uniform as the hours on a day. A thin tinning can be heard needling the roof, and though the window is shut firm, the smell of rain seeps in from the parking lot asphalt out beyond the door.

A flap of wallpaper has come loose in the corner by the door, suspended there just beneath the ceiling, wilting away from the partition. The glue has twined out in stretching filaments, the slight strings distended but still attaching one part with the other, wall to paper—an opaque white webbing of sorts that has begun to sag. A lamp sends cords of glow redirecting off the frail surface of the strands, the light constant, reflections altering as the threads pull downward. The loose fold of the paper is about the same size and shape as this page if one were to bend it from the top right corner down to the left margin and make a triangle. It continues to grow though, minutely, night by night, and soon will be too large to describe in this way.

Not long after arriving here she had wanted to move because the alignment of the walls—they made an awful ringing in her head that no rearranging of the items within could halt. So she had told her neighbors, the Russians. But she hadn't—had not moved, and now the room has long since foregone the services of housekeeping, a courtesy normally offered to all units on a daily basis. Initially it was in the name of privacy, though now, independent of tenant, the circumstances of the space dictate its further neglect by the staff. Plus, the weekly charge is paid ahead years, so no worries there.

The room at present is emptied of life, but it is quite filled with things. Olive oil, coal dust, moisturizer, and several other less defined scents bond together, piqued in the close-shut air. Upon opening, the door stops short, the room without enough cleared space to accommodate its full arc. The tile floor of the doorway is framed by beige carpet, only an inch or two of which is visible around the set ceramic squares. The rest of the floor is packed full, miscellaneous furnishings placed side by side and in many places stacked up, covering the space from wall to wall (and at some points approaching the ceiling as well), obliging anyone desirous of entering to scale and climb around on the clutter, turning all the possessions into stepping stairs. With time to form in drifts, columns of dust have built up just inside the entrance. The door will spread debris across the glazed tile, some pushed out into the neutral shag. Some floats.

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

Once inside the door one would have to place themselves onto the wrinkled pea-colored settee situated immediately within, finding somewhere to settle or stand amongst its contents (which, besides many other things, include a disabled mouse trap, plastic action figures with missing limbs, a tri-colored celluloid windmill, a series of pressed and laminated leaves, a globe of the moon done up with proper topographic accuracy, a snow shovel, disintegrating paper dolls, a file reading: JOHNSTON, SHERYL that had spilled its contents all and sundry down past the cushions, a toothbrush, et cetera), and this just to close the door behind oneself. The settee and its accumulations are what stop the door from opening fully, but had they not, with all that there was in the room, if they had one day just decided to up and walk away on their own, it would have been difficult to spot the difference. Items depended on others to maintain their verticality, but that was all—there would have been a little avalanching and then still again. Something would have filled their absence.

After this first step inside, the going gets more mountainous, with less surety of foot and escape from there. Further, davenports and a leisure sofa lay surmounted by three-legged chairs, pillows of the decorative sort (nice to look upon but uncomfortable to lie with), scraped marble slabs severely fractured or of unprofitable cuts, bunting and shards of fabric, loose trails of chenille, tissues, a pair of grievously stained end tables, strewn plastic shopping bags and newsprint, a rocker with one of its flooring tusks shattered, a spent can of shaving foam there, a child's windup jack-in-the-box here, drawing pencils and rubbers, stray drill bits, an upturned prie-dieu, unraveled lamp shades, a wooden balance, bottles and matches, machine-woven rugs atop sections (to further realize the elevation as the room's proper floor), a mandolin wrapped in plastic sheeting, a rock hard marshmallow, and whole and torn blue and pink-lined paper doubling as confetti scattered throughout.

Front and center of the single window to the left of the door is a circular ironwood dining table with a high-backed and ornate throne-like seat on it, shapely carved wooden arms and legs and a rising timber sculpture of abstract patterns above the headrest that comes nearly to the ceiling, the cushioning of the backrest and stool upholstered with orange, paisley fabric. Its seat is broken through. The chair, surrounded on the table with glass milk bottles and hatboxes, faces outward and would be furnished with a view through the glass pane before it if the drapes were not drawn in place. Matted with dust, the curtains suck against a crack in the window. The spidering of the glass whines and breathes, holding them close.

Below the chair and table there is a rope ladder coiled into a mound of cords and planks. Beside this pile there is a typewriter with its hammers tied up together, poised in midair. The machine is missing several keys, mostly vowels, and the return lever abuts a cement sculpture of a hen, its back hollowed out to be used as a planter. In the little chicken, small clumps of potting soil and two sticks of beeswax lip balm. A lambent crystal-cut ashtray to the side of the chicken holds marbles and ha'pennies, most of the marbles blue, a few of the pennies turned an alfalfa green. Set against the far wall, an armoire flanks the table. Its mirror-covered door is open an inch. Rows of multihued stick-on eyelashes are pressed to the mirror and beside them, animated by a draft from the splintered window, goose down from long missing pillows can be seen circulating around the reflection of the planter and typewriter and rope. A pale gray stuffing feather is lodged between a ruby-colored marble and stack of coins, point down, frill up.

Within the armoire, massed upon a sizable pile of terrycloth towels and cotton stockings, paperback books line the length of the cupboard in rowed stacks that rise up several feet. They are arranged there sitting flat, the spines turned in toward the back wall. Just over the books is a calendar paged to the month of May in a year bygone. Above the boxes that designate its days, a

hazy picture decorates the month: poppies, blurred by the winds and long grass near Rousillon. A sea-blue cereal carton, mostly empty, sits on top the armoire with scores of dust bunnies, plastic lining edging out of the box top. Beside it a frayed electric blanket hangs down over the wardrobe, half behind the wall, wires exposed from out of the moldering cloth. Below the blanket, a broad, stripe-leaved plant rests within a planting shell on a saucer of bone china. The plant is collapsed and the planter is plastic. The dish is thin and emblazoned with hand-painted eastern blooms. The flowers and their medium are on an old wooden student's desk, the kind that are all of one piece, a single arm wrapping around into a workspace with a storage shelf under the seat. Small metal toys are there on this shelf arranged in poses, cowboys and soldiers and spacemen. To the side of the planter and saucer there is a gardening identification stick lying on the desktop. It says 6.99 horizontally and *Calathea ornate* vertically, particles of dirt still clinging to its pointed end. An image of an angel appears alongside the common name of the plant, and a registered trademark emblem beside the winged child down near the plastic spearhead. The topsides of the shriveled leaves have faded pink stripes running out to their edges from the center of their blades. They look as if drawn on by children. The desk is a left-hander, the seat crowded with extraneous dollops of brittle paint, and on the desk arm itself the little plant stands alone, its underleaves dark purple and black, dead of thirst.

Placed crookedly in a frame on the wall is a snapshot of a young shirtless blond man with a barbell mustache. His pants are hitched up above his bellybutton, his hands on his hips (which are slightly cocked). He is smiling marvelously at the picture taker. The black and white have ash-yellowed with age and now his hair color in the photograph is the exact shade it was in the real light of that far distant day. A ray of lamplight reflecting off a compact makeup mirror spotlights his lower body.

A Finnish cape lined with native fox fur is draped across a bicycle rim that is propped against the neutral-primed wall. Fingernail clippers sit on a piano bench with other cosmetic goods, its file unfurled like a knife, a little boy's imaginary scimitar. The extracted soundboard of a parlor grand rests horizontal and exposed, crushing unknown structures beneath it—empty strawberry cartons, firework packaging and a squash racket sit on its topside and mallets are wedged between the steel cords of the instrument. A dozen cheap sunglasses are gathered in a pile next to a dated and out of state telephone directory. Sheet music is nestled in the hollow torso of a dressmakers dummy, notes running down the pages in streams of ink. A miniature service bell lies on its side, tongue lolling useless against its curved metallic swoop. Beside the bell is a tilting trash bin filled with new cotton swabs and ersatz lace.

In a sinkhole—between a cheap metal filing cabinet, a collapsed masseuse board and two folding chairs that ramp against a hat rack and an upturned piano bench—a clear path down to the floor. On the taupe carpet there, a faint discoloration of white. A skewbald and shorthaired kitten had lived here as well. And then, when she had resorted to feeding on toothpaste—forced to, there being little else to be had—she had left the stain. The kitten liked the mint paste fine until it started retching on the plush and then it kept shaking and it was certainly an unfortunate sight. After that the room's only pets were the praying mantises that managed to be caught in the bushes outside the front office of the motel. The kitten had had a favorite spot amidst the jungled clutter. There is an asymmetrical mirror fastened to the baseboard of a wall and shielded off by boxes. When it had been clear to the room, this kitten loved to fight with itself in the image made there in the mirror. A toothpaste stain is here as well, now behind boxes. She had tried to shoo the animal away long before they ran so low on food, but it's all in the tone of voice and not in what one says, and even in her most unwelcoming speech she was alluring to the little beast and

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

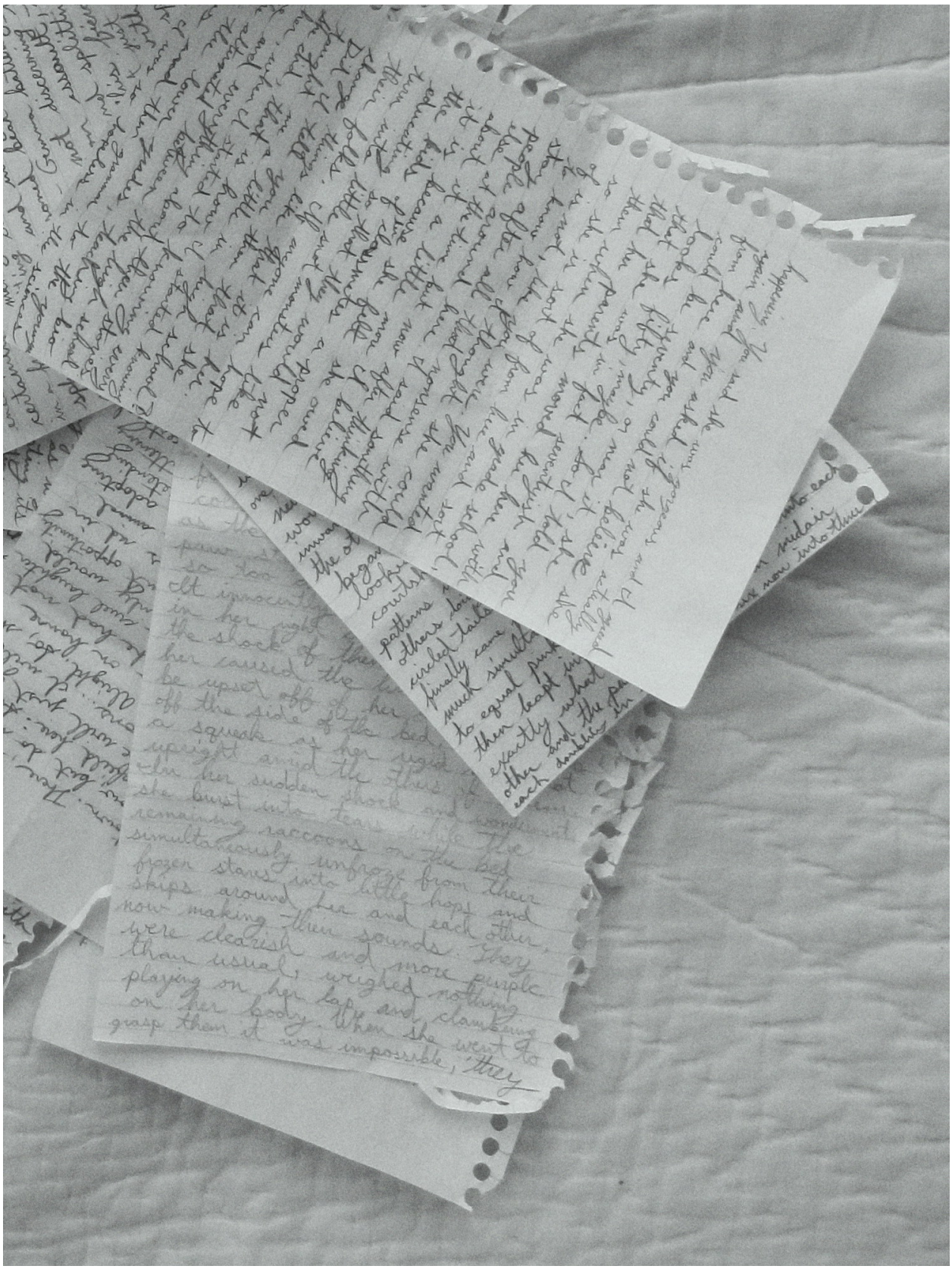
so it insisted on staying, sneaking back in through a break in the window screen and then going unnoticed in the clutter for hours. Like so many drops of belladonna in a lover's drink, the paste won out in the end, chasing the little feline away.

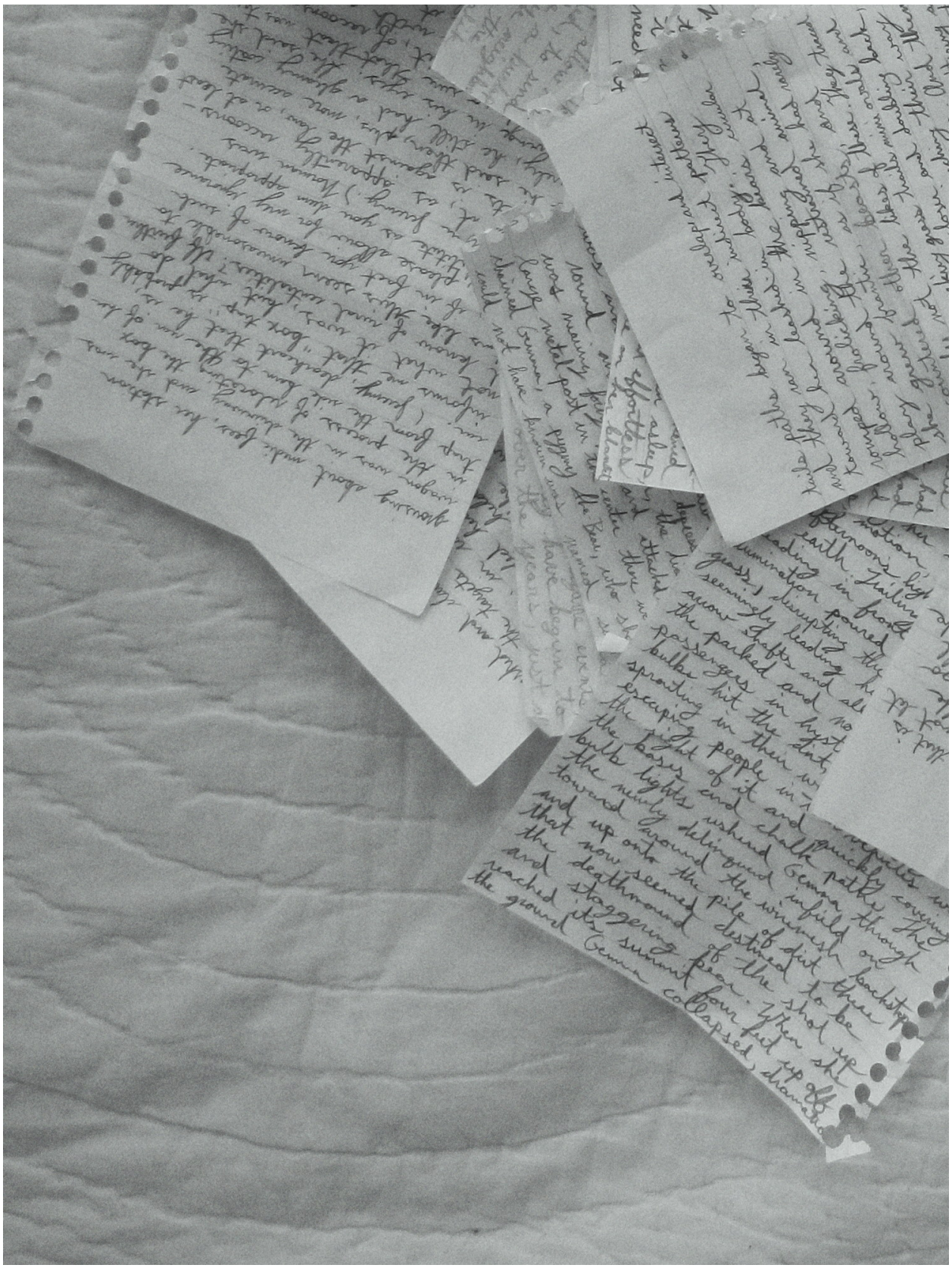
Painted the color of a Christmas morning sky by its original owner, a wooden birdcage leans at a severe angle in the fabric-fill of an argent serving platter, landscaped there by a roughhewn horse blanket and a pile of undergarments. Being of firm wood attached to the top of the cage, the perch holds its proper place while the barred door goes with gravity, displacing, hanging open. Inside lays a pendant of Saint George, pencil shavings, a plastic thimble and a crumpled photograph. The picture is titled on its back print paper: *Me, G & Con*. They all had arms thrown across one another's backs. The girl in the middle, her hair marcelled and artificial colored and she ox-eyed, turned in three-quarter profile, a stain along her jaw to ear and a smile, distorted by motion. One of them, the one to the left—they have their head cut clean out of the picture leaving a blank space that shows through to the blue of the bars behind the photo. The one to the girl's left, his eyes in the flash of the camera were stuffed olives suspended in milk. A shroud of white tulle covers the lower half of the cage, which is actually the top for now—the cage being as it is, at an angle and upside down. The pale tulle is spotty with age and darkened with dust.

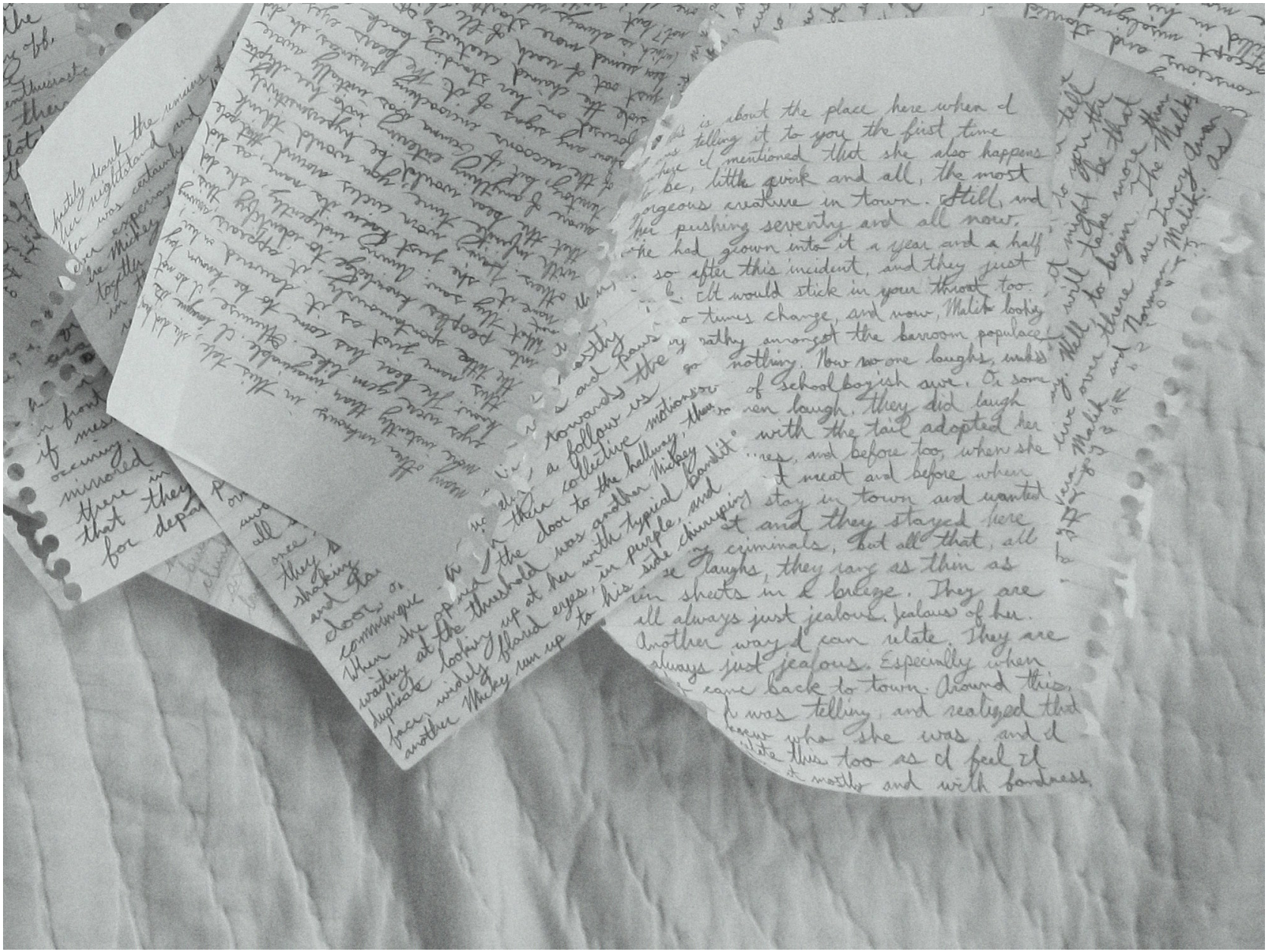
On a red nightstand next to the bed there is a statuette of an eleven-pointed deer rendered in gold. An arrowhead before the deer was set so that its point is aimed up for the animal's vital parts. The initials of the seven-year-old who discovered the slate relic in northern Florida were carved in above the hafting area: *A.L.S.* Small, multicolored beads are sprinkled around the perimeter of this scene and behind there is a pile of crumpled tissues with several squeezed-out tubes of paint. Toppled beneath the nightstand, a metal spatula thick with dried oil color is affixed to the royal red leatherette of a Gideon's Bible. The book is torn in two, having only the Old Testament part left. And all of this, all these things, they are to the door's side of the bed.

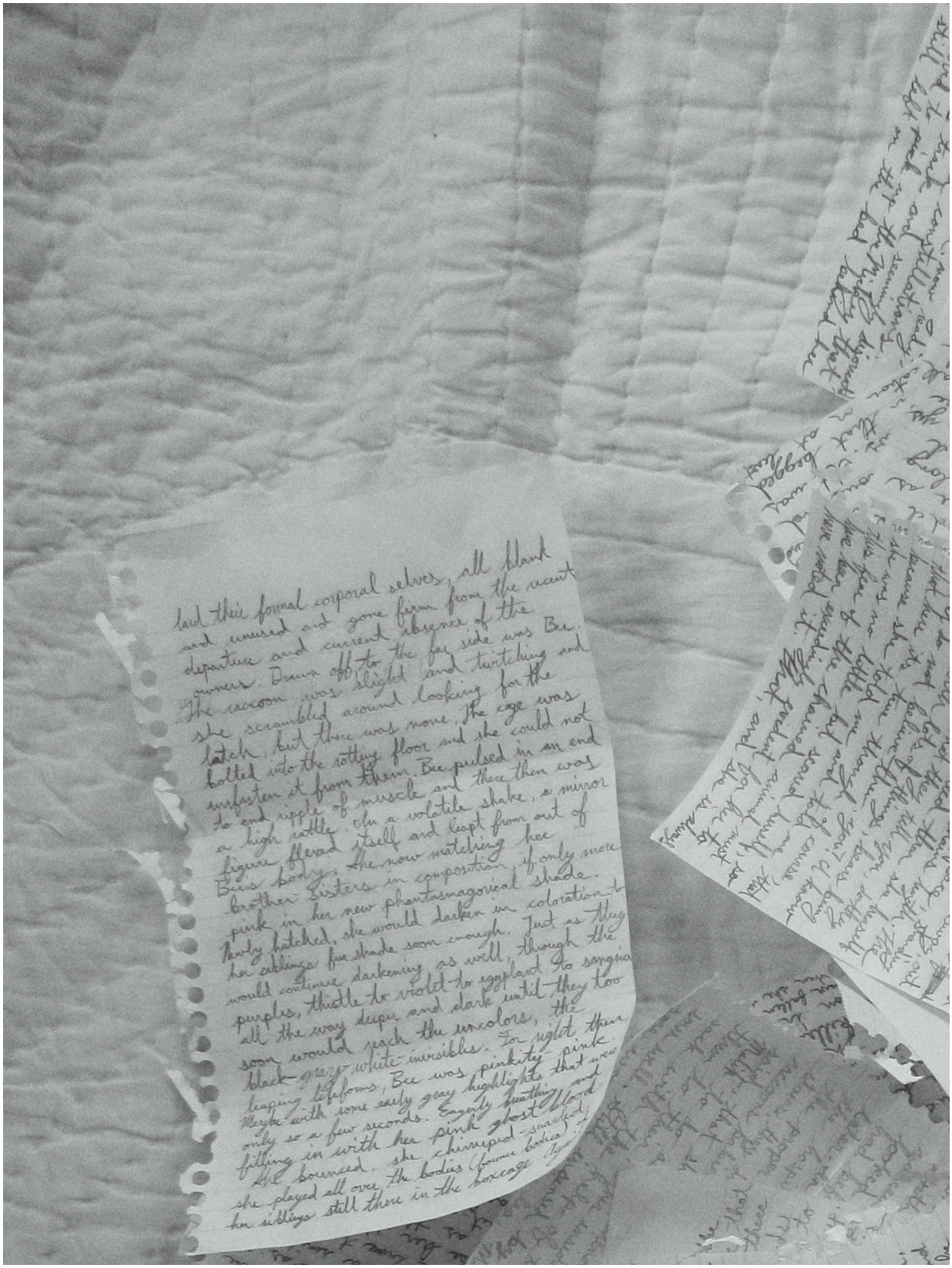
The bed, being the necessary centerpiece of any room like this, is composed of a series of mattresses in differing colors and sizes that rise pyramid style—kings and queens relegated to holding up the base, doubles and double singles upon them, and up toward the ceiling, leaving just enough room to recline or lie propped up on one's elbow, a twinned plateau. Broken out of the casement of a side, tufts of wool show through a tear. Attached to the wall at the end of the bed is an arrangement of fruit (plastic reproductions of pears, grapes-on-the-vine, citrus, pomegranates and berries) that serves as ornamentation in the place of a proper headboard. Above on the plaster stalactite ceiling there is a small spot where she once hit her head before acclimatizing to the surroundings. The pointed frozen drip of its material is still stained a clotted dark.

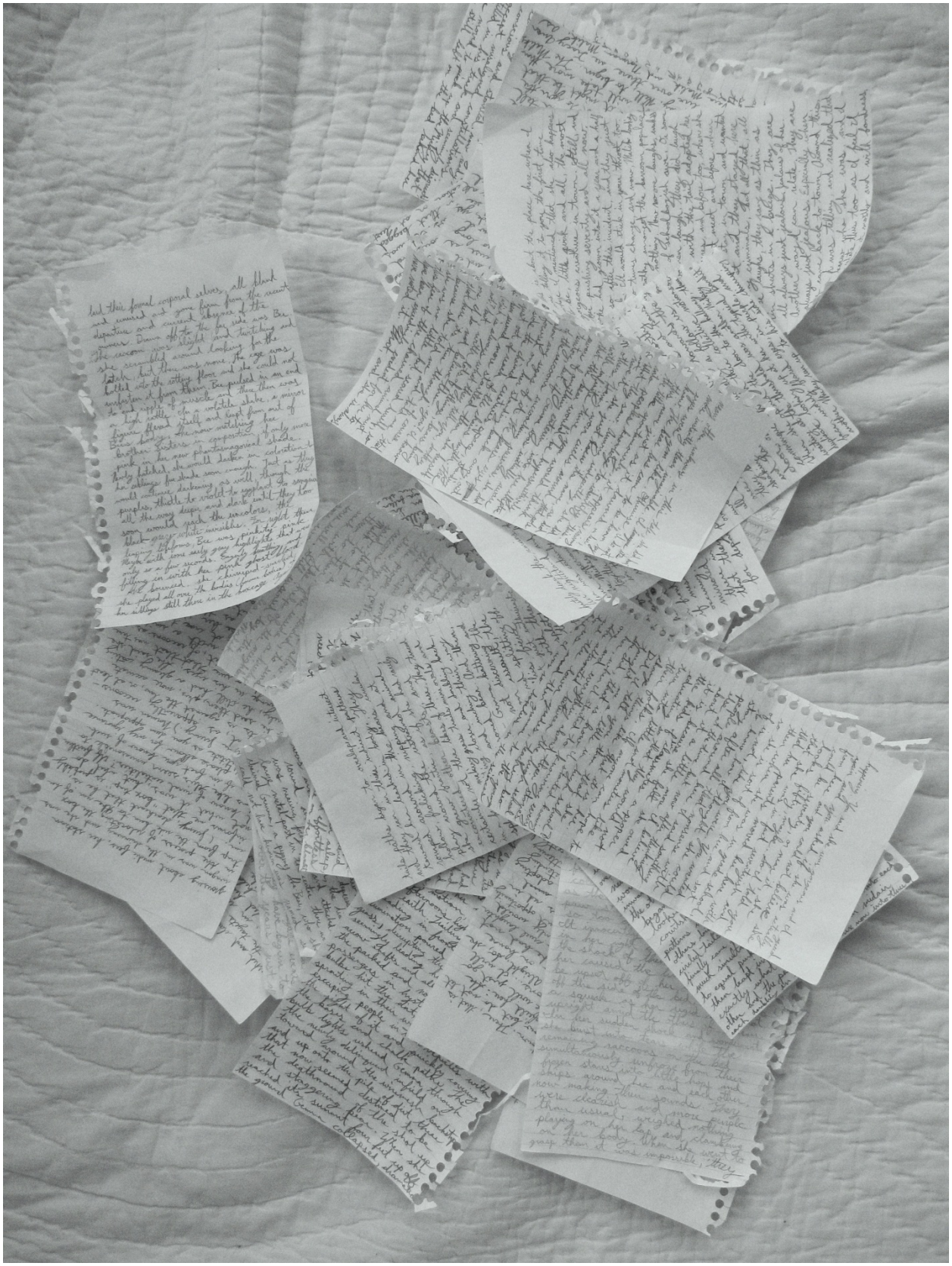
The topmost mattress is bare of extra padding or sheets. A small white quilt is spread across the middle. In the right corner of the bed, duvets swathe an edge of the artificial harvest, hanging there, spilling over the side. The plush of the top mattress is uncovered at the far end, showing a blue shell and diamond shaped stitching. Against the wall a worn envelope is sheltered within folds of the cornucopian décor and there are pages laid out on the quilt, massed in a random, amoebic cluster, identical creases trisecting many of the pages. Poor, sharp cursive handwriting in pencil fill the pages and they sit overlapped and obscuring each other, pages upon pages.











Some of the pages have drifted from the bed and fallen. One has found its way to the floor, managing to weave through the surrounding obstacles to lie face down, nothing discernable on its blank lined plane except mirrored impressions. The words press through from the other side, small mounds of backwards letters. Some potted ivy that had been growing over things, now cracked and brown, edges the sheet. It is beginning to curl back in on itself.

Opposite the bed there is a mass-produced particleboard entertainment center that holds a TV. The set can play radio, AM stations at least, and it almost always has. Even now it is on, humming, screen blank-black, the volume turned too low for the music to be audible. On top of the television there is another, smaller television. On it there is a mock-ivory facsimile of Romulus and his brother taking turns nursing at the teats of a wolf. The statuary rises out of a base that was made to look as jade. Hand-woven flowers of green cloth round the image in a semicircle and bury a violet orthodontic retainer. The mouthpiece is in a seafoam-clear plastic case. A label-maker sticker on the case gives return instructions and the owner's name, which is covered over by a drab textile petal. That single flower and the case rest on an open reference book. The entry displayed is *Digitalis*, with an illustration of common foxglove to the right. The fabric blooms have all been scented with individual oils and perfume.

Hollows of cicada grasp onto the gold gilt sun spikes that radiate out around the clock frame above the televisions. Once Ursula had sat out front here all through the evening watching them crawl up from the ground, climbing the walls and hatching to the next stage, splitting their backs in half and leaving their external bodies behind—skeletal husks, clinging fast to the fenceposts and building sides as the cicada scuttled away to still, waiting for blood to inflate their wings. After they had gone and flown off, hissing and singing as they do, she went about collecting the empty shells of the insect and fixing them to new perches—their limbs still able, without their creature intelligence, to hold fast. Above the entertainment center now there is a ray for every hour and an empty body for every ray. The clock shows 11:13 but it does not move.

Interlocked, a stack of white plastic lawn chairs face the bed on the side furthest from the door, all manner of discarded clothing thread through their seats and legs: blouses, skirts, formal dresses falling from the sides and briefs, tube socks and a chemise, pantyhose and stretched undershirts. Well soiled and out of fashion, an ermine throw is wrapped around a bundle of Braille tarot cards on the corner of an oak dresser that has several drawers open. The drawers are filled with treasures, miniatures, magazine clippings and floral fabrics, wooden toys and puzzles, a cross-stitched welcome sign in royal blue and orange (the 'W' obviously just an upside down 'M'), a full package of lozenges for treating head colds, stacks of Polaroids with Sharpie-inscribed titles (*Duchess of Apricot*, et cetera), a glass tumbler with a rosette wine swimming in its clear, a pencil-scrawled cookbook, and so on.

One drawer, the highest, is just barely open, and within there is but a single item repeated in large multiples, a letter in an envelope—all letters, all in envelopes. While a few are open, most remain sealed. All hold a constant handwriting and are nearly identical—blue envelopes and black print, intended for the same recipient and always care of the locale's postmaster, specific address unknown. Ursula Miner. Grove's Jump, SC. Ursula Miner. Vance, AR. Ursula Miner. Leighings, TN. Gallax, GA. Bonille, LA. Fort Falls, MS. None of the contents of the letters in the drawer are visible. The postage dates range over years.

The back of the room is composed of two parts. To the right, a room within the room, built out—a small square, the bathroom. The bath door here perfectly in line with the front door. Along the back wall to the left, there is an alcove. The recess has a sink countertop that spans its breadth and above the counter the entire wall is covered in mirror. Fastened to the wall on the

left is a high storage shelf with a garment hanger built in below it. Several wooden hangers with ball-joint attachment fixtures are suspended from the bar, but there is no clothing on them. The storage space above and the counter (and even the undercounter and mirror), like everywhere else, are brimming with things.

Nasal inhalers, dental tape and book-clipped scenes of Fatima fold around each other in the basin of the sink. A blue-dyed woolen afghan is crumpled in a corner next to the mirror and a slender chocolate mint plant is fastened against itself there, against its image, its roots exposed, earth without container lining a dull trail across the soapstone countertop. Insecticide spray bottles mingle with household cleaners beneath the counter. Unmatched plastic gloves, yellow and citrine white, slump over a blow drier. Strings of safety lights frame the mirror, long shorted out. Six and a half white pills lay on a Sears-Roebucks catalogue opened to beachwear. They have little 10s etched into them and the half one just a 0. A marble pestle lies beside an unlit stick of incense, its mortar lost by the Russian girls who had lived on the other side of the building one spring. They gave a coffee mug with an illustrated prism on it as a replacement. The cup sits by the pestle filled with ground leaves.

On the counter a portrait reproduction of a pair of deerhounds leans against the wall and doubles in the mirror with much of the room. The dogs stand and sit, obedient. A still-life spread of fig cakes with heavy cream, green apple slices, pink-fleshed roast, squash, biscuits and tea is arranged in their midst. Back from the mirror a latticework of scrap wood is piled with tufts of dressmaker fabric, out of which rises life—a moth, beating designs about the room. It grazes and soars, doubles, lands to disappear again among other masses. The door of the washroom is closed, locked. A strip of light edging out beneath.

Two prewar sewing machine cabinets are stacked, one on the other. A leg of the lower apparatus stands on a piece of notepaper. On the work surface of the highest sewing machine sits an ordered collection, or collections rather. Collections brought to one another: on a plane of breccia, an apple murex propped over a sundial. A lightning whelk and crown conch between graphic and porphyritic granite. Mica and snowflake obsidian surrounded by nutmegs and buttercups, lion's paw and violet snails, nummulitic limestone, a rose petal tellin, flesh pen and green star shells and muscovite schist. A riise's worm and a black worm lay together with beautiful caecum, gold mouthed triton, tracertine and peat. False limpets sit on banded rhyolite and fossiliferous shale embedded with cockles. Astartes, with their concentric sculpture, are edged by tusk shells and coffee malampi, natural chalk white and red. Further out on the cabinet extension are spoon shells and jet with leaved jewel boxes purple and orange on a septarian concretion, its pale inlays a map of veins traced by hornfels, spotted and garnet. Augers and turrets and five furrowed and yellow-stained bittersweet rounds are cornered by chestnut turbans, pitchstone and kimberlite. Maiden miter and pumice are threaded over by an egg ribbon of channeled busycon. Adam's arks and miniature moon sails lay next to a ram's horn, lithic tuff and agglomerate, a twirled wire habit of silver and dove shells. And there with them all—shellstones and stones and shells—three milk teeth. Single cusped eye teeth (H & C) and a lateral maxillary incisor (G). The page beneath the sewing machines is a surface wrapped over itself, and the words written between the overlap touch and cancel each other out. What can be seen says:

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

Nathan Smith

MONDAY

OCTOBER 21

BLOOMVILLE, FL

URSULA AVA

AND WEDDED STRING AND ARROW

With a start. In a white room, porcelain upon clawed feet on tile: Ursula, sitting up in the bath. Waves greenish off the ringed walls of the tub. Breath with her heart—intemperate, mercurial. Her sudden motion had water out on the floor. As she settled back it edged over her. She went under, and came up again.

In the bathtub her body looked childish. Concentrated around her nose and eyes, and diffusing around her hairline, carrot-root freckles adorned her face. Tracing out her jaw, a bruise that had been there always below her right ear. And close-cropped natural light curls, flattened to her head and pulling away at the neck. A single small whorl spun above eyelashes and the rest, dulled gray-green eyes and all, pale-washed white there in the tinted water. Lifting her hands she saw her fingers, slender and pruned.

There was no soap to be found in or around the bath. She put her nose under her arm for a moment and breathed in. Drew her forearm back across. Her body was displaced by angle and aspect in the water as the below will when form is submerged from the above. She searched the water. The marbled-clear shower curtain was pulled halfway around the bath, distorting her view when she turned toward the doorway. There had been a knock.

Ava honey? You haven't locked the door, have you? Please don't. Have you looked at the invitation yet?

There was no answer. Ursula looked at the water and her body in it.

Want to be sure they're alright with you before they're sent out. Do have a look, won't you?

She glanced at the small nightstand beside the bath. The question again—to look. She turned, made some splashing noises in response. Silence. On the short columned pedestal there was a plain plate with an orange and a card on it—the orange skinned and half separated into individual parts, the card resting in its unsealed envelope. Of this typical orange, eleven sections of flesh—the golden ball comes to pieces and is in them. There were no more questions from behind the door, she alone with herself again.

The water was room temperature and felt as if it were coalescing, fibrous on her. She shifted it fresh, straightened her back and reached for the orange. Veins of pale film and the cells held inside separated and sweet and pulp split out through the white. She crushed the part into her palm as if it were tissue. Orange coursed down hand and wrist and fell to the bath. With anointing motions she flecked juice into the water and then flipped the spent slice to where it bobbed by her toes. And through the remaining pieces the same way. The sugars made particolored spots and swirling trails on the surface of the bathwater before dissolving into its body.

Southern winter light produced a pale warm, if only in image—reflection come through the filter of windowpane from off the moon. Down in rows the trees out past the high bathroom window were dusted with small aureate-white flowers, the night through thick with seeds dotting the veil of skyline. Above and below, the ocean swells. The stars in rows too, we are just too close to see them.

And the envelope sat on the plate, on the pedestal, alone. And they beside it, Ursula and the orange—in parts, in the bath. When she picked it up the sap on her fingers sank through to the insides, and there, printed in the body of it: her name, and: WE CORDIALLY INVITE YOU TO JOIN US ON THIS SPECIAL DAY. . . .

Released, it drops. And into the water URSULA MINER ran away.